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44 Western

MAGAZINE

AUG.

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SCANDAL



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IT WORKED!
AND HE SAID
MY ACTING
WOULDN'T FOOL
A CHILD!



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SWELL BLADE!
NEVER HAD A
QUICKER,
SMOOTHER
SHAVE!

THIN GILLETTES
REALLY RATE.
THEY'RE MIGHTY
KEEN AND LAST
A LONG TIME



HERE'S THE
MON-- WHY,
WHERE'S THAT
THUG?

RIGHT HERE, DAD.
THE MAN YOU
SAID COULDN'T
ACT-- LARRY
PHELPS!

HE'S
HANDSOME



TO THE NEW STAR
OF "LITTLE AUGIE,
GANGSTER"

...AND HIS
LEADING
LADY!

WHAT
A
GIRL!

A THIN
GILLETTE
SHAVE ALWAYS
MAKES A
HIT



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THAT PEP YOU UP, USE THIN GILLETTES.
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RAZOR PRECISELY, SO THEY PROTECT YOU
FROM THE IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES.
ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES



15¢



.44 Western

MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

NO REPRINTS

Vol. 15

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★ .44 TALK ★

IN THE evening on the roundup, the night breezes blow cooler, and the punchers draw closer to the campfire. There's an oldtimer in the bunch, his gnarled fingers working deftly on a new hair riata. His saddle-bowed legs are drawn under him as he concentrates, lips pursed, on his task. In the background stands the chuck wagon with the sound of clashing tin plates coming from its vicinity as the cook repairs the ravages of the last meal, and gets things in shape for the pre-dawn breakfast. And sometimes a smart cowhand swings a lazy axe, chopping kindling for the oven—just sixteen inches long. If he chops enough to put the cook in a good frame of mind, maybe there'll be an extra piece of pie on his plate when he answers that welcome call, "Come and get it . . . !"

"Well, Pop," says one of the hands at the fire, as he draws the string from his sack of Bull through his mouth, and wets his quirkly, "Tell us about the time you chased Bat Masterson all through the streets of Dodge City, and almost filled him full o' holes. . . ."

Everyone laughs, and Pop looks up from his work, his gray eyebrows drawing together a little, his hands tightening.

"Time wuz," he says, "when guns would of spoke if a short-horn run off at the mouth so disrespectful to them what was gray on the trail afore you was dry behind the ears."

Pop bends over his riata again. "I remember," he says "One time in San Antonio when we was bringin' our trail herds in. We had a young fellow with us who liked to do a mite o' talkin'. Ellis, his name was—Curly Ellis. . . ."

Men like Pop are the real yarn-spinners of the West, or for that matter, of any place. Unfortunately, though, too few of us ever get a chance to hear those old gents whose heads are so full of stories of the glory days of the frontier. For those of us who don't have the chance to gather around those campfires, and listen to the oldtimers spin their windies, another form of storytelling must take its place, produced from the Golconda of memories, of first-hand acquaintanceship with the people and the land itself, which we may enjoy and thrill to—rugged, vigorous, and colorful fiction sagas which are printed each month in these pages.

Most of the men who write our fiction were born and raised in the West. Take

G. Arthur Alan, for instance, whose hang-noose yarn appears elsewhere in these pages. Listen to what he has to say about his yarn.

" . . . There is a great deal of controversy as to whether or not Bill Longley really escaped the hangnoose. I give it to you just as I've heard it from a number of oldtimers who claim to be in the know. Many of these oldtimers had come north in the eighties to Dakota territory with herds of Texas longhorns. My grandfather had a large ranch northwest of Devil's Lake on the fringe of the badlands, and as a kid I knew many of these oldsters well. They were full of stories of Texas and the Great Trail. My grandfather for years had outfitted and bossed bull-trains out of St. Paul into Dakota Territory, before he decided to settle there himself. My mother was born in a sod-house on the prairie. . . ."

Then there's Tom Roan, that hellfire spinner of action yarns. Born in the South, Tom became a soldier of fortune, joining the Philippine Constabulary at a time when there was plenty of action. Later, Tom came back to the States, roaming through the cattle country of Montana and Wyoming and breaking horses for the Army.

And that's the way it is with the rest of our writers. They're men who know the West, and have it in their blood. And when you leaf through the pages of *.44 Western*, you can pretend, for a moment, that you're hunkering around that roundup campfire, listening to the old longhorn gent with the hair riata in his hand, spinning a yarn that brings back, in all its red-blooded drama, the untamed frontier.

—THE EDITOR.



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SCALPS FOR SATAN

By George Williams

JOHN GLANTON, was a tough hombre. At the age of sixteen, backed by a Texas Ranger foster-father, he already held in that formidable body the rank of captain. But that was long ago, and this was 1849, the year when the California gold fields beckoned a man who had sand in his craw and an empty pocketbook.

So John Glanton, at the head of a gang of hard-case adventurers, set his course for California.

Arriving in Chihuahua, their provisions needed replenishing. This posed a problem, for their funds were barely sufficient to secure their sea-passage. They were consulting in the town square, counting their pennies, when one of their number who had been reading a notice posted on the bulletin board, hollered: "Hey, John! Come an' read this—our problem is solved!"

And so it seemed, for the notice was an offer by the Governor to pay two ounces of

were the beckoning gold fields. They squandered the pelt-money with reckless prodigality, drinking and gambling, feverishly patronizing institutions and devices calculated to pleasure the mind and the flesh. Soon the money was gone.

So they set out on a second scalp-gathering foray. Again they returned with a bountiful harvest, having been even more singularly successful this time.

But now something happened; something sinister began to raise its head. The singular success of their campaigns was coming apart at the seams. Rumors oozed through the cracks—rumors that Mexican rancheros, their hired hands, and sometimes whole rural families, lock, tuft and hair-knot, had mysteriously vanished. Black hair was black hair. Where had the scalps come from? Were they Apache or peon? *Quien sabe?*

The populace changed from a festive to

Two ounces of gold for a black scalp! Each time those ruthless, killers-for-pay rode out, peaceful rancheros—and sometimes whole families—vanished. . . .

gold for each Apache scalp brought him. Apaches were raising hell just then, murdering and looting and burning, to mention the least objectionable of their depredations.

"Boys," exclaimed John Glanton, "here is where we make us a stake."

It was a swift, bloody, brilliantly executed campaign the boys conducted. Before long they returned with a creditable catch of Apache scalps—bucks, squaws, pa-pooes—it made no difference to the Governor who wanted the redskins exterminated.

So impressive was their return, they were feted, feasted and fanfared, and marched under triumphal arches to the Governor's palace where they were paid a brace of doubloons for every scalp produced.

They now had money to burn, and they promptly proceeded to do so. Forgotten

a somber mood as the whispers made the rounds. Things looked black; so black in fact, John Glanton and his hard-case crew saw the light—they beat it out of Chihuahua as fast as their ponies would take them. But not so fast that retribution failed to catch up with them.

Crossing the Colorado at Yuma, they indulged in an altercation with the ferry man and murdered him for the sake of ending the argument in their favor. This was a mistake, for it so happened that the ferry man was a very good friend of a hard-bitten old Yuma Indians' chieftain.

That night, as John Glanton and his gang lay snoring in their blankets, relaxed in their well-earned rest after the hard-won Colorado crossing, and feeling wholly safe from vengeful peon or Apache, the Yumas massacred them to the last man.

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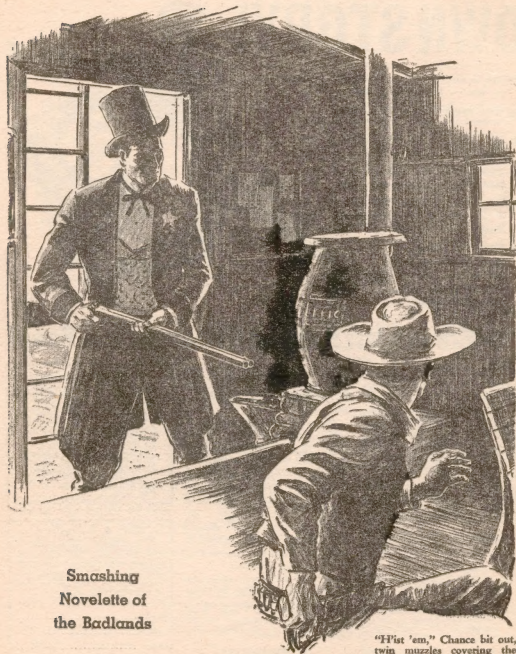
"I have managed a lot of great ball players, and Joe is one of the greatest."—Joe McCarthy.

"In my opinion Joe does everything pertaining to Baseball in the right way."—Connie Mack.

"He is as good a ball player as ever put on a spiked shoe."—Joe Cronin.

"Joe DiMaggio keeps alive the Murderer's Row reputation of the Yankees."—Babe Ruth.

That Town-Taming



Smashing
Novelette of
the Badlands

"Hist 'em," Chance bit out,
twin muzzles covering the
three men. . . .

Tinhorn!

By Ed Earl
Repp

CHAPTER ONE

Tinhorn Doublecross

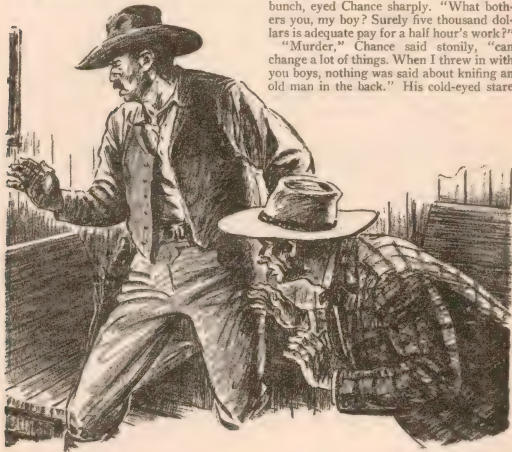
THEY had been talking of murder and theft and profit, those five men ganged up in stableman Denver Red's dirty little office. To all of them except young Chance Sanders it had been pleasant

talk. Five equal stacks of silver and gold coins reposed on the spur-scarred surface of the battered table around which they sat. A quart bottle of whiskey had passed among them several times, bringing a flush to their faces and a loud boldness to their voices.

Chance Sanders was the only man who hadn't raised the bottle to his lips.

Gentleman Sam Furness, leader of the bunch, eyed Chance sharply. "What bothers you, my boy? Surely five thousand dollars is adequate pay for a half hour's work?"

"Murder," Chance said stonily, "can change a lot of things. When I threw in with you boys, nothing was said about knifing an old man in the back." His cold-eyed stare



Saloon Row laughed openly, and honest citizens gaped in amazement when Chance Sanders, branded as a tinhorn gambler, pinned a star on his black frock-coat and set out to tear apart the man-breaking murder combine that had once saved his life!

included them all. "I want no more of it."

Gentleman Sam carefully put his elbows on the table, the movement pulling open the black frock coat that hung from his heavy shoulders, so that his shoulder gun was within easy reach of his hand. Impatience burned in his deep-set eyes.

"I told you the knifing was a mistake," he said silkily. "Ly got excited. We've been watching you, son. None of us has liked what he's seen. Unfortunately, the pot's too big to pull out. I wouldn't if I were you."

A gambler's fatalistic outlook on life rode Chance Sanders at that moment. He was one against a ruthless four, and an argument with them could terminate in only one way. Yet this had been a long time in the making, and he had always known what he would do when these men called his hand.

"Deal me out, Sam," he said in a gentle, dead tone. "Tonight."

Outside the barn, the night was dark and filled with the nocturnal noises of Prairie City, tainted with the smell of recent death. Here in the office, the kerosene wall lamp flickered smokily, and in its guttering light Chance eyed his jury.

They were of one breed, drawn together by a mutual lust. Gentleman Sam Furness was the oldest, a big graying man dressed in the gambler's traditional black, a black-sheep outcast from some old Southern family. His was the mind that had knit this gang together, and he had done a good job of it. Denver Red was another, a big, uncouth man, smelling of horses and leather and feed. Few men could equal him with a gun. There was Ly Hook, the small, wizened barber, foppishly dressed, as skillful with a knife as he was with a razor. Then there was Pike Leisy, squat roly-poly bartender at the Longhorn Saloon, his outward humor masking a cruelty that bordered on the sadistic.

Chance himself was the remaining member and the youngest. And looking back on it, he'd seen where his inexperience had made him a useful dupe in Furness' skilled hands.

It had started innocently enough. Gentleman Sam had saved Chance down in San Antonio from an angry mob of Texas ranchers. Chance's father, as straight a gambler as ever broke a seal on a deck of cards, had swung from a live oak that day,

accused of running a crooked game. If Gentlemen Sam hadn't slipped young Sanders out of town, he might have shared the same limb with his father. He had carried his blazing grudge and hatred with him to this day.

Furness had played on his hatred of cattlemen. They worked the trail towns along the path of the longhorn migration northward after the Civil War. Nothing gave Chance Sanders more satisfaction than to sit in a poker game with some Texan whose pockets bulged with money derived from the sale of his herd of cattle. Those clumsy, honest cowmen seldom got up from the table before they were cleaned.

Honesty had been an easy thing to overlook, the way Chance figured it. Those Texans got a better break than they'd handed out to his father. They had it coming.

But Gentleman Sam, his father's partner, was out for more than revenge. He'd spotted Prairie City here in Kansas as the next big trail town. He'd moved in with ready plans. It began in a small way. Before Chance knew how big a thing it was, he found himself enmeshed deeply.

Pike Leisy, at his job behind the bar, picked up all the trail news. Gentleman Sam had known of old Tom Odell's big drive north weeks in advance. Ly Hook had personally shaved and barbered old Tom this morning when he rode into town. After he'd sold his herd, Furness and Chance had tried to inveigle him into a poker game. They'd failed. After one drink at the Longhorn bar, he'd headed straight for the livery barn to pick up his horse, carrying his money-laden saddlebags with him.

Chance had thought that was the last of it. He hadn't dreamed that Ly Hook would lurk in the gloomy barn to plunge a knife into the old man's back. Then with Denver Red's aid, they'd looted old Tom of his money and carried his body to the trail south of town.

That was what Chance had walked into when he came to this midnight meeting at Gentleman Sam's summons. It had opened his eyes, and it had filled him with a sordid bitterness and disgust.

Robbery was one thing in Chance Sanders' code—and murder was something else. Even if old Tom Odell was the man who had bossed the job of putting a rope around the elder Sanders' neck!

Now Chance had split with the bunch. He awaited their wrath.

"You're not smart, my boy," Gentleman Sam told him, as each man in that room tensed his muscles for action. "This means we've got to eliminate you—"

THE rusty sound of the door knob's turning stopped him. The five men came up rigid in their chairs, their guilt pressing heavily on them, their quarrel forgotten. For they were one against the town. Death would be their immediate reward if their unholy alliance was discovered.

The door cracked open a slit, until the safety chain stopped it. A smooth, low voice came from the darkness on the other side.

"It's me—Matt McKing. I want to talk to you boys."

This meeting had been inevitable, and Chance had long wondered what would happen when it took place. McKing was kingpin of the lawless element of Prairie City. He owned the Longhorn, the largest saloon and gambling house in town. He took a cut of all gambling profits, and his word was law along saloon row. To incur his displeasure was to invite a quick grave, and he was noted for his short temper and ready guns.

Yet in the six months since Gentleman Sam had moved into town, not one cent of the gang's profits had gone into Matt McKing's big gilded safe.

Gentleman Sam said, "Come in, suh," and moved forward to unfasten the chain, but not before Pike Leisy had swept the money off the table into the late Tom Odell's saddlebags.

Matt McKing slid through the door. He was tall and built like a buggy whip, dressed in expensive broadcloth. His hooded eyes took in the room with one swift glance, came to rest on the empty table. An expression of annoyance flitted momentarily over his hairless face.

"You boys work fast," he said. "I had Odell's money ear-marked myself. They've just found him out on the trail. The coroner's out there now."

"Those are harsh words, suh," Furness said. "We don't know Mr. Odell or anything about the gentleman. Just what are you trying to imply?"

McKing chuckled. "A deal, my friend. And when I'm through talking, you'll see

things my way. I'm no fool. I spotted your game the first day you hit town. I let you get away with it because there's enough money for both of us—and because the law-and-order crowd here might take advantage of a fight between us."

His voice grew harsh. "You've played hell this night, misters. You didn't figure all the angles on this job. Tom Odell has a brother here. Didn't know that, did you, Furness? That brother happens to be John Odell, and brother John happens to be the firebrand that can light a fire under our tails."

Gentleman Sam cursed softly.

"John Odell," McKing continued, "is both mayor and banker of this town. He thinks a lot of his older brother. He knew that old Tom was going to put that twenty-five thousand in his bank until he headed back for Texas. What do you think he'll do now that his brother shows up dead—and minus that cash?"

All pretense left Gentleman Sam. He spread his slim hands wide in a helpless gesture. "I didn't know, suh," he admitted. "What kind of trouble can this John Odell stir up?"

"Enough to put a rope around our necks," McKing told him. "He's Texas, he talks Texas, and every damn Texan along the trail will come running if he gives the word. Did you ever see a bunch of those hellions when they got killing mad?"

Furness shivered. A sickly gray settled over his handsome face. "I know what you mean," he muttered. "It looks like we played hell."

"You have," McKing agreed. "That's why I'm here. That and the disagreeable fact that you're getting too big. Pretty soon we'll be fighting each other. I'd like to talk that over with you, Furness. Privately. Right now, I'm interested in one thing—getting rid of John Odell."

Furness didn't blink an eye. "You mean . . . kill him?"

"If there's no other way. Otherwise, he'll see us wiped out as soon as he learns of his brother's death. Since you started this, it's only fair that you finish it. Have you got any ideas?"

"Yes, suh, I have." Gentleman Sam pointed a slim finger at Chance. "This lad has cause to hate the Odells. They strung up his father. He's often threatened to get

even with old Tom for that. He's going to take the blame."

Chance shook his head. "Leave me out of this," he told them. "Dammit, I told you I was through."

"My boy," Furness murmured, "you certainly are. We're going to tell John Odell that you killed his brother. You won't squirm out of it."

"You'd frame me?"

Gentleman Sam smiled pleasantly. "Of course. You're no longer one of us. In view of our past warm association, you'll be allowed one opportunity. You've got tonight in which to flee this town. Is that agreeable?"

"It will have to be," Chance said tonelessly. "May I go now?"

"The sooner the better."

Chance faded into the night. After his footsteps had died away, Matt McKing eyed the four men grimly.

"That will save our necks," he told them. "Why not show a nice profit on this thing, too, and let Sanders take the blame? I happen to know that Odell's bank is crammed with money to cover the needs of some extra-heavy cattle sales this week. Sheriff Blood is an open-minded man who sees things my way. With his aid, we can swing it."

McKing had come to the livery barn with definite plans. He outlined them now. For almost an hour they talked, before the meeting broke up. Crouched just outside the office door, Chance Sanders heard everything.

Revenge, he thought grimly as he slipped away unseen, would be pleasant. Only he was in no spot to collect it. Yet there was a small measure of satisfaction in the thing he had decided to do.

Long after he had left town, Gentleman Sam and the others would have cause to curse the memory of the man they had double-crossed.

CHAPTER TWO

A Star for the Gambler

THE young gambler hurried to his boarding house. In his room, he carefully examined his shoulder gun, a stubby .41 caliber derringer. Digging into a small trunk, he pulled out a hand-tooled cartridge belt and holster, and the long-barreled .45 cali-

ber Frontier that had belonged to his father.

The elder Sanders had been deadly with that weapon, faster than any gunman Chance had ever seen. Yet he had always insisted that his son was more than his equal with a gun.

Strapping the extra gun-gear about his slim waist, hidden under his long black coat, Chance left the house by a rear door. Skirting Main, he crossed Front Street, the deadline separating the respectable business and residential district from the saloons and dives and bawdy houses that catered to the brawling trail trade.

This part of town and most of the people who inhabited it were strangers to him.

Prairie City was a twenty-four hour town. Stores were open, and shoppers straggled along the dusty streets, even at this late hour. Stationing himself in an alley across the street from the bank, Chance soon found his caution rewarded.

He hadn't been there long before Matt McKing and Gentleman Sam Furness emerged from the bank and turned down the boardwalk toward saloon row.

They had wasted no time in pinning Tom Odell's murder on him. From now on, Chance was a hunted man, his life forfeit if ever he was caught. Common sense told him to put Prairie City behind him at once. Pride and a sense of injustice held him to the path he had chosen.

Many minutes passed while he watched men hurry in and out of the bank. Sheriff Blood was among the first that banker Odell summoned by messenger. Soon a posse of riders gathered, then rode off into the night. Armed citizens roamed the town on foot, searching alleys and buildings. Twice, Chance had to move to escape detection.

Finally, an early morning quiet claimed the business district again. Time was growing short as Chance cautiously crossed the street.

He found the bank foyer deserted at this early hour. A sleepy white-shirted cashier admitted that John Odell was in his private office at the rear of the long room.

"Mr. Odell doesn't wish to be disturbed," the man objected. "If I can't handle your business, you'll have to come back later."

"No," Chance said. "I'll see him now."

Ignoring the cashier's indignant protests, Chance strode to the office door. It opened to his touch. Without pause, he stepped in.

John Odell was not an old man, but he looked it now. He sat at his desk, shoulders sagging wearily under his rumpled coat. Dark shadows rimmed his bloodshot eyes. A harsh grief marked his unshaven face. The eager expectation that had filled him ran out under Chance's swift appraising glance.

"What can I do for you?" the banker asked dully.

"I'm not sure," the gambler said. "My name's Sanders. Chance Sanders."

John Odell came out of his chair with a bound. One big hand grabbed Chance's coat front. A great fury burned in his eyes.

"You killed my brother!" he burst out. "We found him tonight!"

Chance shook his head, feeling sorry for this man. "I didn't do it," he said. "Would I come here if I had?"

A puzzled look cut through the other man's fury. "No. Not if you were smart. Why did you come?"

It was a hard thing to put into words—that urge inside him. It encompassed all the hatred, the indecision and unrest that had eaten at Chance all these months. He didn't fully understand it himself.

He said, "Furness and McKing sold you a tall story. With the town on my trail, it leaves them and their gang in the clear. Ly Hook killed your brother—and Furness planned it."

Odell's hand fell away from Chance's coat. His fingers swept wearily across his forehead. "I—I don't know. They're a rotten sort. You're one of them, Sanders, and you had cause to harm my brother. Who am I to believe?"

"You've got a lot of money in this bank," Chance said. "They know it. If the bank were robbed tonight, who would you blame?"

Interest flickered into the older man's eyes. "You, naturally. Unless you were in a jail cell."

Chance said, "Your bank will be robbed before daybreak. McKing and Furness have set it up. I'm letting you know so you can stop it. I've got my score to settle with them, too."

Suspicion put an edge to Odell's voice. "Nobody but a fool would try to rob my bank. It's never been done before. You're going to jail. You'll get a fair trial, Sanders. I can promise you nothing more."

The man's grief made him rock-hard. There would be no changing his decision now that his mind was made up.

Chance had expected it to be this way. But he had tried. His hand slid under his coat, came out with the stubby derringer.

"You're a blind fool," he said. "I'm not going to jail. To hell with your fair trial! I'm leaving town. I hope never to see it again."

THE office door opened. A slim, golden-haired girl stood framed in the entrance. She didn't see Chance as she ran into Odell's arms.

"Uncle John," she cried, "have you found Dad yet?"

Chance stood there watching, the gun in his hand forgotten. This was a part of the past he always remembered. There had been a gay festival down in San Antonio, and he had claimed this girl for a dance. Afterward, they had walked around the plaza under moonlight as bright as day, and he had read a promise in her starry eyes. He'd never found out about that promise. In another part of town they'd hung his father from a tree, and Gentleman Sam had burst upon them, hurrying Chance out of town.

Her first name had been Sue, and he hadn't even learned her last name. He knew now.

She sensed her uncle's stiffness. She turned and stared at Chance. Her blue eyes brightened with recognition, widened at sight of the gun in his hand.

"You!" she whispered, and he saw that she hadn't forgotten either. "What does this mean?"

"It means," Chance said bitterly, knowing that he could not stay here and face her when she learned of her father's death, "that I'm saying goodbye." He moved to the door. "Remember what I told you," he warned the other man. "Sometime before daybreak."

Odell's parting words came harsh and clear. "You won't get far, tinhorn. I'll have a hundred men after you within the hour!"

Just outside the office, Chance came to an abrupt stop. Three slicker-clad figures wearing black silk handkerchiefs over faces already well hidden by wide brimmed range hats had entered the bank's one front door.

Readied guns gleamed dully in their hands.

The tallest of the three stood before the cashier's window. Under the threat of his gun, the trembling man inside the cage was stuffing paper and metal currency into several small burlap sacks. Another man lurked to one side of the door, where he could command the entrance. The third man crouched beside a tall desk in the center of the foyer.

There were more men in the street outside, Chance knew. With a crooked sheriff out of town on a trumped up manhunt, with most of the honest people in town either sleeping or serving with the posse, this was one bank stick-up that should go smoothly.

Chance was no fool. Let them gut the bank. He'd tried to warn John Odell, and the man wouldn't listen. This served him right. Maybe he'd pay some attention next time.

He raised his hands to show that he wanted no part of this. But he still held the derringer in his right hand, and the masked men were nervous, taking no chances. Thinking that he meant to fire, the trio turned their guns on him. Tense fingers squeezed on filed triggers.

Lead hammered and snarled in his direction. The explosions rocked the big room. The sullen anger that had churned inside the lean gambler all night long burst its bounds, prodding him into action.

The tall holdup man was the nearest. Chance threw two fast shots at him, emptying the tiny derringer. Dropping it, he snatched out the big .45 at his hip. Inside the cage, the white-faced cashier was showing guts, too. He'd pushed a button somewhere, and the loud clanging of an alarm bell sheared through the gun-thunder. He had a six-gun in his hand, bucking and pouring forth smoke-rimmed orange tips of fire.

Chance had one wild thought that they might break up this robbery. Then a giant thunder-clap slapped at his temple. It seemed a long, long way to the floor, and he never knew when he crumpled unconscious upon it.

HE OPENED his eyes to see Sue bending over him, wiping his hot face with a wet handkerchief. He tried to sit up and saw that he was lying on a couch in Odell's office. The girl pushed him back down.

"Sssh," she whispered. "The doctor will be here soon."

Out in the main room of the bank he could hear many voices and the sound of spurred boots scuffing the wooden floor. Slowly it all came back to him.

He asked weakly, "Did they get the money?"

She smiled wanly. "Thanks to you, no. One of the bandits is out there wounded. The rest of them fled."

Chance got a lot of satisfaction out of the news. He hadn't intended it this way—yet it would hurt Furness and McKing far worse, knowing the scrapegoat they'd framed had done this to them.

He spied the back door leading into the alley behind the bank. Again he struggled to sit up, trying to brush aside the triphammers that worked in his skull. The feel of Sue's arms about him, as she held him down, was warm and soothing. He wished his lot in life was such that he could enjoy more of the same.

"I'll hang," he told her, "unless I get out of here now. I'm accused of murdering your—"

He'd blurted it out without thinking. He saw the tears well into her big eyes. She'd been crying so he knew that she'd heard the story.

"You didn't murder Dad," she said gently. "You can't run away unless you want to keep running all your life. You've got to stay and show us you're innocent. Uncle John will help you."

Once more than promise glowed in her eyes. Sight of it stripped Chance of further argument. He had done few upright things in his life. Here was his opportunity to see what lay on the other side of the barrier that had always separated him from decent people. He found himself wanting to find out. Desperately!

More than that, he wanted to see Tom Odell's murderers brought to justice. For there were more men like him coming up the trail, and more women to be left alone in the world, due to the cold-hearted greed of men like Gentleman Sam and Matt McKing.

Chance wasn't forgetting their treatment of him either. This murder was just the start of it.

Doc Adair, a fussy little man, carrying a black bag, came into the room. He swabbed

the wound across Chance's temple with something that stung, took several stitches, then taped a neat white bandage over it.

"You'll be as good as new in a couple of days," he said. "Lucky for you, that bullet didn't come a quarter inch closer."

As the medico hurried out of the office, Chance swung his feet off the couch and sat up. Sue didn't try to stop him this time. The thunder inside his head was leaving. He sat there and pondered his next move.

John Odell stomped angrily into the office. Behind him came Sheriff Blood's tall, swart figure, followed by half a dozen citizens that Chance did not know. But anger and irritation was upon them, lying unconcealed over their flushed faces.

"Sanders, I've told the sheriff your story," the banker snapped. "He doesn't believe it. Tell him what you told me."

The sheriff stepped forward, dragging out a pair of handcuffs. "This man's desperate," he growled. "Lucky for you, I happened to come back to town. If you'd swallowed his yarn, he'd already have vamoosed. He's one of your bandits—besides bein' a killer."

The lawman was almost frantic in his desire to keep the lean gambler from talking. Chance, who had not mentioned Blood's alliance with Matt McKing, delighted in watching the man squirm.

"I'll tell you why he wants me behind bars," he told them. At Odell's gesture, the sheriff halted a pace from where Chance sat. "I know too much about him. He's Matt McKing's man."

Surprise swept over the faces before him as he told of the midnight meeting in stableman Denver Red's barn and of Matt McKing's surprise visit with his plan to rob the bank. Angry growls formed on their lips when they were told of Blood's connection with it.

"It's a damned lie!" the lawman blurted, but his guilt shone in his shifty eyes and the sweat that popped out on his dark forehead under his flat-crowned sombrero. "Not one bit of it is true. You takin' his word against mine?"

John Odell said, "We are." He reached out a hand and ripped the silver star off the sheriff's vest. "I brought the members of the city council in here to see this. We put the star on you. Now we're taking it away from you. You're through, Blood."

Hate turned the swart lawman's face into a twisted mask. "Your town won't last out the week without a badge-toter to handle these wild drovers. They'll take it apart. You don't have a man that can fill my place." He flung a ring of keys on the desk. "You'll squirm for this, Odell."

"I'd like a crack at the job," Chance said.

The banker stepped forward and pinned the badge on the front of Chance Sanders' coat. "Here's our new sheriff," he told Blood. "One of his first jobs will be bringing in McKing and Furness."

A calculating look slid into Blood's muddy eyes. "Mebbe," he said as he moved to the door. "I wouldn't count on it."

"I don't like this," a councilman snapped. "Sanders belongs on the other side of Front. He's McKing's man, too. Why did you do it, John?"

CHAPTER THREE

One Way Ticket to Hell

"WHY did you do it?" Chance echoed. The older man smiled thinly. "Why did you ask for the job? Why did you rout those robbers a while ago? I had a hunch. They seldom fail me, Sanders. I hope you don't either."

Chance stared at the polished star on his coat. He felt its awkward weight against his chest. He wanted to laugh. For years that hated symbol had menaced him. Now he was the chosen keeper of it.

"How much authority do I have?" he asked.

Odell said, "You can go the limit. We'll back you. You realize that the lawless element here will put you out of the way the first opportunity they get?"

"I know," Chance answered, "and I'll handle them. Furness and his bunch will be behind bars today, if the coroner's jury indicts them for your brother's murder."

He knew it sounded ridiculous for him to talk like this. He caught the cynical glances of the council members. It irritated him when he had no right to be irritated. Heeling about, he walked rapidly into the other room.

His two guns were on the floor. Picking them up, he punched fresh loads into them, returned them to their holsters.

In the distance out by the loading pens,

a freight engine's hoarse whistle blasted the still morning air. A cattle train would be heading north today. Chance had the uneasy feeling that he was a fool not to be aboard when it left.

The prisoner's shoulder wound had been dressed by the doctor. Chance recognized the man as Duke, one of the hirelings that hung around Matt McKing's saloon. Disregarding the amazed stares of the citizens milling over the bank foyer, Chance herded the man out the street door into Main.

Prairie City's new jail was located at the intersection of Front and Main, midway between the two sections of town. Dawn poked rosy-hued fingers of light over the eastern horizon as the new sheriff entered the stout building with his prisoner.

"You won't keep me here," Duke warned. "Not after McKing hears about this. I'd hate to be in your shoes, tinhorn."

Chance didn't bother to answer. He felt the same way about. He'd bought himself a one way ticket to hell. There was nobody to side him. He intended to get rid of Blood's deputies the moment he saw them. They'd be riding in with the posse sometime today. He'd be one lone man against the town.

Chance wasn't kidding himself about those city fathers. They'd followed Odell's lead—unwillingly.

They were inside the front office before Chance saw Gentleman Sam sitting at the desk. With calloused indifference to this institution of the law, he had swept a mass of reward posters and official mail onto the floor. A deck of cards lay in neat piles before him.

"Good morning, my boy," he drawled, his smooth voice warm with regard. "Welcome to your new abode."

Chance eyed him coolly, wondering at the purpose that brought the wily gambler here. "After last night," he said, "you're the last person I'd expect to see here. What do you want, Sam?"

"Last night?" Furness spread his white hands out on the desk in a helpless gesture. "A sad mistake. I underestimated you, my lad. I didn't dream you were aiming so high. Why didn't you confide in me?" His bland eyes gleamed cheerfully. "That was the crudest piece of bungling I ever did—trying to make you our goat. I should have known better."

Chance said, "Let's hear it, Sam. What are you trying to say?"

"My boy!" A pained expression slid over the gambler's suave face. "I came to offer my apologies. And . . . to open your eyes to the gold mine you hold in your hands."

Chance shook his head. "The salary isn't much. Two hundred a month, I believe."

"Damned little," Furness put in. "Not enough for you, my boy. McKing and I have merged our—ah—talents. We can offer you a nice cut for your services. A very nice cut."

For one mad moment, Chance wanted to hear that offer. Then a picture of Sue Odell's trusting blue eyes swam before him. At her insistence, her uncle had given him this opportunity to prove himself. Chance was positive of that. There wouldn't be another offer.

"The job isn't for sale," he told Furness. "There'll be a coroner's inquest today. I'll be there, Sam. When it's over, you'll be charged with murder. I'll have to bring you in, along with Leisy and Hook and Denver Red." He stared down into the seated man's eyes. "I'll do it, too—unless you leave town today. That's all I got to say."

"Harsh words, my boy. Harsh words." No emotion flickered across Gentleman Sam's calm face. "Now here's what we can do. McKing has the dirt on some mighty respectable and influential people in this town. He's prepared for this. If you don't see things our way, a petition asking for your recall will be circulated at once. The right people will sign it. In view of your—ah—background, they won't need any urging. We'll have you out of office within twenty-four hours, son. What will happen to you then?"

Anger cut through the rigid set of Chance's face. "Get out," he said softly. "Maybe I can rid this town of some carrion in twenty-four hours. I'm going to try."

FURNESS raked up the cards before him, and evened the deck. He slipped it into his coat pocket. When his hand came out, it held a stubby, silver-mounted pistol.

"Knowing how stubborn you can be," he said, "I came prepared to deal with you, my boy." For the first time the graying gambler shifted his gaze to the man called

Duke. "If you please, suh, you may relieve our sheriff of his weapons."

They took his guns, and they marched him back to a cell. Gentleman Sam locked the cell door and stood there gazing benevolently at him.

"My boy," he said, "think it over. If Duke here disappears, you've got no witness that your old friends were involved in attempted bank robbery. As for Tom Odell—we can produce innumerable people who heard you threaten to kill him. That corner's jury will never indict us."

Idly he rattled the keys in his hand. "I'll leave the keys on your desk with your guns. You'll have plenty of time to think about this before you get out of here. Better change your mind, son. Our proposition is still open."

Chance said nothing. His lean dark face showed none of his thoughts. But chagrin seethed inside him. Prairie City would heap ridicule on a sheriff that allowed himself to be locked in his own jail the first day he held office.

Sue found him there. He heard her soft



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footsteps in the office and the sound of her low husky voice. Shame had stopped him from calling for help in the hour that had passed. He forgot it now.

"In here," he called out.

She came into the cell block and saw his predicament. She hurried back into the office after the keys. A moment later he was free.

"Chance," she cried, "you're in danger. The town is furious at Uncle for appointing you sheriff. He says you can't keep the badge long. But that's not all. I just paid our trailhands a visit at our camp south of town. They're a tough crew, and loyal. I tried to stop them. They're coming after you. You've got to leave town!"

He said, "That would save my skin, but it wouldn't solve anything. Thanks for warning me, Sue. I'll figure out something."

She had overlooked his prisoner's escape. She hadn't questioned why he'd been locked in his own jail. It made Chance feel mighty good to know that somebody in this town trusted him. Cold, hard suspicion and distrust had always been his gifts from life, and they were a stock-in-trade of the shady gentry among whom he'd lived.

"You mean you'll stick it out?" she asked. She wore a black silk dress that showed her generous curves nicely. The scent of her perfume was sweet in his nostrils. He wanted to kiss her, and he didn't dare.

"Yes," he murmured. "Remember what you said about running all the rest of my life. I'm through running, Sue."

She looked up into his gray eyes, her face shining. She put her arms about his neck and pulled his head downward. Her warm lips met his mouth in a short kiss.

Then she was gone, fleeing up the street, trying to conceal the scarlet that stained her tanned cheeks.

CHANCE SANDERS knew Gentleman Sam Furness as well as anybody could ever know him. His aristocratic, southern manner and looks hid one of the shrewdest brains in the Southwest. He was a man who took no chances, who was careful to cover all trace of his crimes.

So Chance settled in his office chair and searched for loopholes in the wily gambler's current activity. It took a long time. Know-

ing how Gentleman Sam had handled similar affairs in the past helped.

When Chance got to his feet, he thought he had his answer.

He took a ten-gauge Greener off the wall rack, and stuffed a supply of shells for it in his pocket. Then he locked the empty jail. Holding the shotgun in the crook of his arm, he sauntered along Front to the railroad station on the west side of town.

He found that the cattle train would pull out of Prairie City within the hour. Chance shoved a gold coin in the station agent's hand and left, knowing that the train would be delayed until he came back.

Doc Adair was town coroner, too. Chance made his way to the medico's office. The inquest would be held at ten o'clock.

At his request, Adair agreed to change the time to nine o'clock, and to notify all concerned persons.

By Chance's pocket watch, it was eight o'clock now.

Leisurely, Chance walked to the Chinaman's. He ordered a big breakfast. Men gave him short nods and hostile stares. No one spoke to him. He ate alone, paid for the meal, stuck a big cigar in his mouth and continued his solitary way along Main.

It wouldn't be long, he told himself. If only they didn't strip him of his authority this morning. . . .

Slowly, with no show of haste, he tramped through the ankle-deep dust to the livery barn. As he had expected, Denver Red was not there. The attendant didn't know when his boss would be back.

The same answer greeted him at Ly Hook's barbershop. The little man was absent from his chair this morning. He hadn't reported for work.

All this activity had consumed the better part of an hour. Satisfied, Chance drifted back to the railroad station again.

The loaded cattle train was on a siding. He walked along its long length, past the huge-stacked, smoking engine toward the crummy at the far end. The bellowing of hundreds of penned-up longhorns beat at him. The smell from the cars was strong.

He swung up the steps into the wooden, red caboose, his Greener on the ready. The twin muzzles of the gun covered the three men inside the car before they knew was happening.

"H'ist 'em!" he bit out.

Ly Hook and Denver Red turned startled faces in his direction. The man known as Duke ripped out a curse and reached for his gun. His hand froze above his holster as he thought better of his hasty decision.

"What you tryin' to pull, Sanders?" Denver Red asked nervously.

"Crawl out," Chance ordered. "This train's leaving without the three of you."

"Like hell it is," Ly Hook objected. "You got no right to stop us. We bought our tickets."

"You wasted your money," Chance told him. "You're staying to face the music, Hook. You'll hang for Tom Odell's murder."

Hook didn't answer, but a rash of sweat covered his thin face.

None of the trio made any move to get to his feet.

Earing back the twin hammers of the Greener, Chance warned, "This baby talks for me. I can't miss. I'm giving you three."

They didn't wait for the count. He followed them down the aisle, keeping them bunched when they swung down to the ground. In sullen silence, he herded them past the station and through a series of alleys to the coroner's office.

THE INQUEST was already in progress. Chance took in the scene at a glance. Crude plank benches were placed around the bare, windowless room. Tom Odell's crude coffin sat on low supports in the rear. Dingy, glass skylights overhead let in light. The cramped little place was jammed with people, drawn by the publicity attending the inquest.

A surprised murmur rippled over the crowd as the sheriff marched his prisoners into the center of the room. Most of the hostile eyes in that assemblage were turned on him. He could feel their anger beating at him with a physical force.

"This has been highly unethical," Doc Adair said after quiet had been restored. "Will you explain, Sheriff?"

"There's nothin' to explain!" someone shouted. Chance thought he recognized ex-sheriff Blood's venomous voice. "Sanders killed the old man and stole his money! He ain't goin' to shake loose from that!"

"To hell with that star!" somebody else yelled. "Let's string the tinhorn up!"

Gentlemen Sam was there. Chance

caught the triumphant smile that lurked on the man's suave face.

"Order! Order!" The coroner finally quieted the crowd. He turned to Chance. "Take the floor, Sheriff. You'd better make this good."

One bunched group of grim men had remained silent throughout the noise. Their faces were burned the color of old leather by blazing suns and driving winds. They wore new, ill-fitting clothing, positive identification of most men who had just reached town after weeks of pushing cattle up the long trail. They could be none other than the late Tom Odell's crew.

"Where does this inquest stand?" Chance asked.

Adair fidgeted uneasily. "There wasn't much to discuss. The feud between Odell and you was well known. And we found the old man's saddlebags in your room this morning. They had his brand on 'em."

"A pat case, eh?" Chance stared about the packed room. "Any of you ever stop to think just how pat this thing really is? Have you determined when Odell was murdered?"

"Definitely," the coroner answered. "He was knifed through the heart sometime between eight and ten o'clock last night. He died immediately."

The lawman turned to the silent, watchful trail crew. His gaze picked out two withered oldsters.

"There's your answer," he told them. "You boys were with your boss last night when I asked him to sit in a game at the Longhorn. He refused. The two of you didn't. We played till midnight. I was with you all the time. Could I have slipped out and knifed Tom Odell without either of you noticing my absence?"

"By Gawd, he's right," one oldster muttered through his shaggy mustache. "He was with us all evenin'."

"I'll swear to that," his companion rasped.

Another member of the crew spoke up. "Most of us saw the game. You can't pin murder on the new sheriff."

The smile disappeared from Gentleman Sam's face.

"Thanks," Chance said, turning to Adair. "Satisfied?"

"I am," the little medico answered.

The sheriff pointed at the sweating forms

of Ly Hook and Denver Red. "There are your killers. I heard the details last night after it happened. I'm not proud of my association with them. I wish you'd listen to my story."

Before that hushed room, he told them about his father's death and his following years with Gentleman Sam Furness. He made a clean breast of everything, and felt better after the telling. When he finished, that roomful of men was with him.

"He's all right! I want to shake the sheriff's hand!" a man shouted. They crowded around him, pumping his hands, slapping him on the back.

During the excitement, Gentleman Sam slipped out of the room.

LY HOOK and Denver Red confessed to the murder. It didn't take the jury long to indict them. Chance locked them in jail, along with Duke. The bank robber's courage had failed him, and he exposed Matt McKing's part in the bank hold-up. Warrants from the County Attorney were promised, authorizing the arrest of Furness and McKing.

Tempers ran hot that morning, as the law-and-order group gathered at The Emporium, the only bar north of Front. Their talk was of marching down on saloon row and cleaning it out. Despite John Odell's pleas for the mob to disband, it grew larger, spilling its overflow outside into Main.

Prairie City was one big powderkeg that was aiming to bust, Chance told himself. There'd be hell to pay before this day ended.

He stood on Main, listening to the crowd, when Pike Leisy eased up beside him. He had been running. His fat little body was drenched with sweat.

"Sam's down to the jail," he puffed. "He's quittin' town. He'd like one last word with you. Alone."

Chance nodded his head. "Tell him I'll be along soon."

He watched the fat bartender waddle away. A feeling of rare satisfaction warmed him. He'd proven his right to wear the badge on his chest. Tom Odell's murderers were behind bars. Now Gentleman Sam was leaving town. That suited Chance. He owed his life to the gambler. The warrant for his arrest hadn't been delivered to the sheriff's office yet. Letting him escape would pay off that debt.

If he could find Sue, the day would be complete.

He knew she would come hunting him. Look as he might, he failed to glimpse that golden head among the crowd. The thought struck him that she might have gone to the jail. He strode rapidly toward Front.

He was inside his office before he remembered that he'd locked the door before leaving. Now it was open. And he had company.

As his eyes adjusted themselves to the dim light, he saw Gentleman Sam once more sitting behind the desk. Again he was riffling a deck of cards between his nimble fingers. Blood sat tall and menacing beside him, beady eyes unblinking, his swart face a somber mask.

Sight of Sue, bound and gagged in a chair, brought Chance to a rigid halt.

"Hello, my boy," Furness said in gentle tone. "You may lean the riot-gun against the wall back of you." And after it was done, "Don't look so surprised. Surely, you didn't imagine our late sheriff would leave his only set of keys with you? We simply walked in. He's a vengeful man, quite ready to use the gun in his hand. Please don't force him."

Following Chance's gaze, he continued, "We are indebted to the young lady. She came here inquiring about you. It suited our plans to—ah—detain her. As you can see, my boy, she resented our kind attention."

"Get to the point," Chance said. "Why did you send for me, Sam?"

"Clever lad," Furness said indulgently. "Look at this thing from our viewpoint. Here's McKing with gold pouring into his pockets. Here am I on the fringes of luxury. Both of us must flee from this bonanza with wanted posters haunting our backtrail. Who is to blame for our present position? You, my boy."

His voice hardened. For one brief moment the mask slid off Gentleman Sam's face. Chance stared into cold, bottomless eyes that somehow looked like the depths of hell. He shuddered.

"Do you think we're letting a double-cross like yours go unpaid?" Furness lashed out, "You're saving our necks this day, you son! You're going to stall that mob. While you're doing it, we'll be quitting town."

"It's too late to run," Chance warned. "What are you going to do with the girl?"

Gentleman Sam laughed harshly. "Pike Leisy is bringing up a conveyance. We're taking her to the Longhorn. She'll be in capable hands, my boy. Matt McKing saw her with her father yesterday. He's wanted her ever since."

Chance had heard of McKing's way with women. The sordid story had come from the lips of a percentage girl who worked in the saloon. The thought of Sue being handled like that filled him with a swift, nameless fear.

"If that's your offer," he said, "I might as well try to stop you now."

Furness stared at him. "Go ahead if you want it that way. If you see it our way, we'll be moving out of here in a hurry. The girl will be safe until we stop. Your co-operation will assure her of a little extra time before McKing forces his—ah—amorous self upon her."

Chance gauged the distance to the desk. He tensed his muscles for the leap. Sue cried out incoherently behind the gag. The click, as Blood eared back the hammer of his single action revolver, sounded loud in the office.

He didn't have a chance. Slowly, he relaxed his body.

"You win, Sam," he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Rakes in a Pot

FIVE minutes later, Chance hurried along crowded Main. Pike Leisy had driven up behind a team. Gentleman Sam had released Ly Hook and Denver Red from their

cell. The three of them had lifted Sue into the buckboard, climbed in and driven away. Ex-Sheriff Blood had held Chance under his gun until they were gone. It had been as simple as that.

Chance found John Odell in The Emporium. He had to shout in the banker's ear to make himself heard over the roar of the mob. The older man's face turned ashen as the portent of those words soaked into his brain.

"Nothing can save her." Sickly, the banker shook his gray head. "I've talked myself out. They won't listen to me."

Sue's plight had stunned her uncle. Staring at the inflamed cowboys and townsmen about him, Chance saw the futility of arguing with them. The whiskey was fast bolstering their courage for the think they intended to do.

There was precious little time left in which to try and save the helpless girl.

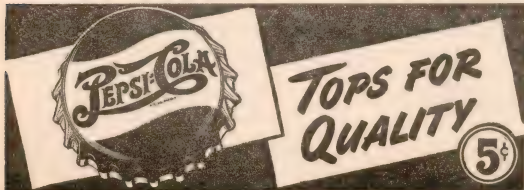
He saw the Odell trail crew gathered in a tight knot at one end of the long bar. Here were men of action, steadfast in their loyalties and faithful to the brand for which they worked. An idea flashed into his mind.

Chance slid into their midst. He told them about Sue. Their eyes hardened with decision. Several of them cursed softly. To the last man, they turned from the bar, ready to shoulder their way through the crowd.

"Wait!" Chance told them what he planned to do, and asked their cooperation. It was a daring plan. They listened carefully and soberly nodded their heads.

A moment later, they drifted into the street.

Back in the jail office, Chance picked up the Greener. Then he walked along Front



toward the railroad station until he had put three blocks behind him. Turning sharply to his left, he headed south. This alley speared the dirtiest and the poorest shacks of town. At a certain point along it, he stopped and waited.

IN THE distance a sound like distant thunder grew, its position marked by a slow-rising pall of dust. It bore upon Prairie City from the south, bringing to experienced ears the panic-stirring knowledge of a wild stampede. Thousands of hoofs churned the deep, dry dust of the trail, shaking the ground underfoot. Needle sharp horns clattered against each other like sabers as scaly-hided cattle ran flank to flank.

A solid wall of live beef swept down Main Street, carrying every movable object before it.

A grim smile rimmed Chance Sanders' wide mouth as he hurried in the direction of that din. Through the drumming beat of those sharp hoofs, he picked out the faint sound of sixgun shots. That would be the Odell trail crew urging those critters along. They had fulfilled their share of his plan.

The stampede would scatter the mob. It would give Gentleman Sam and McKing time to make their escape. The confusion gave Chance the opportunity to slip behind the Longhorn unseen. He intended to block that escape.

Although forewarned, he was surprised at the extent of their preparations. Matt McKing was taking most of his men and a lot of his equipment with him. Chance counted twenty saddle horses tied to the rack at the saloon's rear door. A dozen big mules carried bulging moneybags. Four heavy freight wagons with matched six-mule teams were almost loaded.

Sue's bound figure was being lifted into one of those wagons.

The drag-end of the stampede swept by. The thunder of hoofs and the shaking of the ground subsided, leaving a strange quiet and a thick curtain of dust over this end of town. McKing would start his strange caravan now. He'd be miles out of town before the mob reorganized and marched down on saloon row to discover his flight.

Still Chance huddled in the semi-gloom of the alley.

Finally it came. The sound he had waited for. Pistol shots broke out in Main. Hoarse shouts came out of the saloon. Most of McKing's men rushed back into the Longhorn, thinking the mob was upon them. That would be the Odell trail crew again, Chance knew, and he wished them luck.

The canvas-topped freight wagons rocked as long whips cracked. Ponderous wheels began to turn. The wagon carrying Sue came past Chance, taking the lead.

It was now or never. Gliding forward, he placed the muzzle of the Greener against a mule's head and triggered. Another blast sent the companion mule down, too. The dead leaders collapsed in their harness, bringing the rest of the team to a confused, bunched halt against them.

He found Sue up front, close to the driver's seat. He picked her up and made his way toward the rear of the wagon. There was no time to untie her. They would be discovered any moment. Swinging himself and his burden over the high tail-gate was difficult. He landed on the ground, covered with sweat.

The rattle of gunfire was louder now. The dust was lifting. Gentleman Sam came around the end of the wagon. Hard eyes gleamed out of a ruthless face.

Chance tried to shift Sue's weight so he could reach for a gun. A black-clad arm lifted before his eyes and slashed downward. He felt the paralyzing blow from the gun barrel in the gambler's hand. His muscles turned to water. He slid to the ground.

Furness lifted Sue into the second wagon. Chance watched the scene through blurred eyes. The other three wagons swung around the stalled wagon and disappeared. The riders came next, each man leading a pack mule. Half a dozen riders trailed them to protect the rear of the fleeing outfit.

A torrent of armed men ran out into the alley from the saloon. John Odell found Chance as he was climbing to his feet. The pistol blow had ripped along his wounded skull, tearing the bandage off it so that blood ran down into his face.

Strength seeped back into Chance's muscles. He dabbed at the trickle of blood with his handkerchief.

"Sue?" Odell asked out of ashen lips.

Chance told him what had happened. One saddled horse remained at the alley

hitchrack. The sheriff untied the animal and settled in the saddle.

"They won't get far." His burning gaze swept over the crowd about him. "The wagons will slow them down. I'm going after Sue."

A wild roar came from the mob. They scattered to find mounts. Chance drove his spurless boots into the horse's ribs, urging the animal into a run. Hearing the pound of hoofs behind him, he hipped around to see a compact group of riders come racing out of the dust to join him. The Odell trail crew was not to be denied.

THE McKING outfit was traveling fast. Fear, not wisdom, was behind their haste. Chance and his companions caught up with the rear guards some ten miles west of town on a flat plain. The half dozen riders opened fire before their pursuers drew within pistol range. Chance did not fire the long-barreled Frontier in his hand. But the Odell hands cut loose with a vengeance.

Chance saw Pike Leisy bouncing in a saddle. Suddenly he screamed and tumbled off his racing horse. Ly Hook tried to quarter away. A bullet folded him in two, sent his mount thundering away with the dead barber's foot hung in the stirrup. Knowing his fate, Denver Red swung his horse around and shot it out with them. He died with his smoking gun clutched in his fist.

With grim precision, Chance paralleled the course of the lead wagon. The occupants of the swaying vehicle couldn't see him. Someone ripped a slit in the side canvas, so they could fire at him. The wind picked up the billowing cloth and ripped it off the hoops. He could see Gentleman Sam and McKing jolting about in the wagon bed. Blood was behind the reins.

He triggered once—twice. Blood tumbled from the high seat down between the wheels. The wagon began to sway and roll wildly. Gentleman Sam grabbed for the ribbons and managed to get them. But the gambler was no driver. Besides, he had figured the odds and found them stacked against him.

Gentleman Sam set his weight against the brake and the lines. He fought the team until it came to a stop.

Matt McKing went berserk. Before the wagon had stopped rolling, he leaped out of it and came running at Chance. The two guns in his hands bucked and smoked as he triggered.

Chance fired one shot. A small black hole appeared on McKing's white shirt over his heart. He plunged face down in the wild prairie grass.

That left Gentleman Sam. Chance slid out of saddle and faced him. The gambler swung out of the wagon, his hands raised shoulder high.

"My boy," he said gently, "self preservation is uppermost in my mind. I wouldn't think of matching gunplay with you—"

Chance carelessly let his Frontier sag away from the gambler.

Gentleman Sam's right arm dipped with startling speed. Flame burst from his hand. Chance felt the numbing impact of a bullet high up under his left armpit.

It was an old trick. One he'd seen Furness pull in many a disputed poker game. The tiny derringer concealed in his coat sleeve was held by a rawhide thong so that it came sliding down into his hand whenever it was needed.

The derringer spat lead once more, but this bullet whistled aimlessly into the sky. Chance had triggered twice, putting two bullets through Gentleman Sam Furness' black heart.

"My boy . . ." the gambler sighed. He crumpled to the dry sod beside Matt McKing.

Trickery had carried Gentleman Sam along a reckless, inevitable trail. It had failed him at the end of that road.

The chest wound was bleeding, sapping the strength from Chance. But he knew it was not serious. He thought of Sue and pulled himself into the wagon bed with her. He cut the ropes that bound her.

She removed the gag from her mouth. She looked up at him. Her starry eyes contained the promise he'd never hoped to claim.

He put his arms around her. She kissed him. He knew she was sobbing. He wanted to rest. The thought came to him that he'd gone a long, long time without sleep.

The switch from gambler to lawman had been pleasant. Grinning, he went to sleep in Sue's arms.

Blood-Money Pardners

By Roy Vandergoot

A hangman's noose waited for him back in town; before him lay flight, and a new chance in life—but Wade Anders was the kind of hell-for-leather hairpin who'd gamble his reckless neck on a new-found pardner—whom he knew he shouldn't trust!

HE LAY on the bluff overlooking the little cowtown, staring down at the hubbub below. People were going back and forth, entering doors and emerging from them, and riders, decked out in their best, were coming in from the outlying ranches. There were flags, and there was bunting, and all in all it was clear to Wade Anders that great festivities were pending.

He grinned. So much the better, he thought. The town would be full of horses and stealing one would be an easy matter. Many riders would be drunk and consequently careless of their mounts; they would forget where they had put them and how long they had left them there. They likely would stay late and discovery of a missing bronc would be late. That was good. That would give him time to cull them, to be choosy and to take his pick.

Wade's smile broadened. He felt as if his luck at last were turning, that the ill lay behind and the good ahead. It was as if the very display of those festivities below was heralding for him a better time to come, as if the celebrations were charging the air with a fresher and freer feeling. . . .

Yes, he decided, as soon as dusk fell, he would try his luck. In the meantime, it was a long time till dusk yet and thirst was nagging him. The concealment of the shrubbery didn't offer defense against the summer heat. He wondered if he could stick it till dusk. It occurred to him that he had better find a shadier spot in which to wait.

A bit to his left, in a little draw, was a stand of aspen. There, he thought, would be a deep shade and, perhaps, a measure of

coolness. He began making his way there, circumspectly, keeping low so no casual glance from below would spot him.

He had only eyes for the danger below and that preoccupation tripped him up. When he heard the sound, he knew he had been seen and he came like lightning into an upright stance, snatching his gun from the holster and aiming it at the source of sound in one smooth, coordinated move of muscle and mind. He said, "Stick 'em—" and then halted, gasping, and feeling foolish. He felt irked, too, for he was instantly aware of the fact that his actions were a dead give-away.

She was not tall, although her slenderness conveyed that impression at first glance. Her eyes were the deep brown of manzanita bark, her hair chestnut, with a little light in it where the sun filtered through the aspen leaves. The eyes were wide open—a little too wide—and her face, a smooth oval framed in the wealth of chestnut curls, was pale. She was, he saw, frightened.

He said, putting the gun back in the holster, "You don't need to be scared. I won't harm you."

Her answer amazed Wade. "I'm not scared," she said. "Not of you. You—you're scared yourself."

He essayed a grin, not too wholeheartedly, for he realized how well she had sized him up. "I didn't expect to see you here," he explained, lamely.

"Nor I you." Her grin matched his. It was not wholehearted either. If anything, it was sad; though that was not it exactly either. He thought of the word "wan," and decided that this came nearer.

It puzzled him. He studied her closer, not being able to place her. She didn't look like a town girl, and she certainly wasn't a farmer's or rancher's daughter. He wondered what she was doing here, hiding in the aspen grove. A girl of her age oughtn't, he felt, seek the solitude of the grove while below the festivities beckoned. Looking at her like that, he thought he saw that she had been crying and the discovery roused

something deep within him. "Why," he exclaimed, "you've been cryin'. You in trouble?"

She shook her head. "No."

The answer was a little too prompt, too abrupt and curt to be truthful. That was the feeling he gathered. It caused him to stare at her, speculatively; a look her expression reciprocated. As if his eyes prodded her to offer an explanation, she said: "Maybe—maybe it's because people are having fun, down there."

That didn't explain much to him. He said, "Uh-huh," not wanting to pry too much in her private affairs. It might be just a lovers' quarrel that had upset her. The thought irked him, for some strange reason. He asked, "What's it all about? The celebration, I mean?"

She stared at him now. "Why," she

said, in a puzzled tone, "it's the Fourth of July. Didn't you know?"

HE BLUSHED under his dark stubble, uncomfortably aware of the fact that he had once again put his foot in it, given her an insight she couldn't very well fail to interpret correctly. As if to substantiate this, she said, "You must've been—er-uh, out of touch with things around here a long time."

That, he thought, was wording it very nicely. He nodded. "Yes. I was. I, uh, sorta lost track of things."

He was silent a few moments, debating things within himself. He thought, I might as well tell her everything. Maybe she'll help me if she can.

But somehow he didn't. He said instead, "Why don't you go down and have some



"All right, you skunks,"
he snarled, "Hoist 'em!"

fun? It's celebratin' time, you know." Her answer baffled him. "Why don't you?"

He rubbed his stubble. "I don't think—" "There's still a barber shop open," she interrupted.

He said thinly, eyeing her intently, "That wouldn't be a very wise move for me to make," and saw the spark flare in her eyes.

"So," she said, "you don't dare go in though you'd like to. Me? I don't want to go back at all. I want to go away, far away, and never see this place again. Never!"

Her vehemence amazed him. "Why don't you go then?"

"I can't. I don't know the country. I tried it once and I got lost. They found me and kept me in a shack out on the desert for a whole week. Then I was glad to come back."

His voice hardened, "Who's keeping you from leaving?"

"Val Carif," she replied. "He owns the Mockingbird Saloon." Her voice rose on a defiant note, "I'm a dance-hall girl."

"Oh."

"Don't say it that way!" she flared. "I didn't come here of my own free will. I'm not what you think!"

"I didn't think anything ma'am." He said apologetically. "I—I just wondered. You didn't seem the type of girl—"

"I came out here to marry a man," she said, speaking quickly, as if she wanted to hurry an explanation she needed to convey to him. "When I got here, he had died—by a bullet. I didn't have money for my fare back, even had there been anything to go back to. I thought I could get work and save enough to go somewhere, some big city, maybe. I didn't quite know what to do. But I couldn't find work except in the Mockingbird Saloon. I waited as long as I could. Then I didn't have a room anymore, and I got hungry."

He said, "I see."

She said, "My name is Ann Beiloff."

"Mine's Wade Anders."

"I thought I recognized you," she said.

He nodded. "Even through my beard, huh? The posters below, I reckon?"

She nodded dumbly.

"Five hundred dollars is a lot of money."

He wondered why he brought that up, and almost immediately he said, "I didn't kill

him. It was a frame-up. We were playin' cards in Deucey John's place, and suddenly someone hollered something about crooked play and the table was tipped over and someone shot the lights out. In the dark, a hand jerked my gun from my holster. He must have fired it and given it back to me. I don't know. It was awfully confusing, what with the shootin' and everything being dark, and, of course, I was a little drunk."

She said, "Of course."

"And there I stood," he went on, "with a smoking gun in my hand when the light went on again. And there was Sheriff Wickers, telling me I was under arrest for killing my own pardner. It was a lie, but I couldn't prove it. They had it all down pat, even to some words Hal and me had had a few hours before over the bar. It didn't mean anything. Just a difference of opinion that we always ironed out afterwards with no trouble. But they played it up big and I sure was in a fix."

"Wickers," she said, "is a crook in cahoots with crooks."

"You tellin' me?"

"I once," she told him, "tried to get away on the stage. In Rim City, Wickers took me off and hauled me back here. Val Carif locked me up in a dark room for several days. I got nothing but water and a piece of bread thrown to me like I was a dog."

He stared at her, his eyes darkening. "The skunk," he bit out.

"That wasn't the worst," she said. "The worst was when he—when he came in to—paw me. I managed to fight him off. That's why he hates me. That's why he wants to humble me, break my spirit. He lets me have just enough freedom so I can hope to get away from him some time. But as soon as I try it, he'll have me dragged back again. It's a game with him."

"A hell of a game," Wade said through his teeth.

"I always hope somebody'd kill him," she said.

HIS fingers were fondling his gun-butt. She must have seen that, for instantly she was beside him. "No," she said firmly. "I don't want you to try it, to risk it, do you hear?"

"Why not?" he said harshly. "Why not? It might set you free, and what have

I to lose? I—" He stopped, seeing the look in her eyes.

She said, "You have everything to lose. Your whole life is still before you. You can go somewhere far away and build again—"

Something in her voice revealed it to him. He said bluntly, "And you figured I might take you with me?"

She looked frankly in his eyes, and her answer was frank: "Yes. I—I had hopes —you—might."

"It'll be a tough trip," he warned. "There's the desert. And there will be Val Carif's guards."

"The desert," she said, "will be tough on them too. And you know the country. You can make it. I know you can."

He nodded. "Maybe." He stood a moment in thought. "I had planned to steal a horse tonight."

"Steal two of 'em," she said.

She was standing close to him and he was looking deeply into her eyes and suddenly something awoke in him that had never been in him before. He said, "I reckon we're a pair," and put out his hand; but she forestalled him, coming freely into his arms, leaning against him. She murmured, "I feel so safe now. So safe. I haven't felt like this for, oh, it seems years and years. . . ."

He put his arms around her and held her tight. She lifted her face then and he kissed her and she answered him with her lips.

He said, a little later, "We'll get married."

There was a smile on her face. And then, suddenly, she was practical again. "You must be hungry!" She glanced at the sun.

"I can get you something, before they'll miss me. I'll be back in three-quarters—an hour at the most. You lay low. I'll hurry."

"The water," he said. "Don't forget the water. I need that most of all."

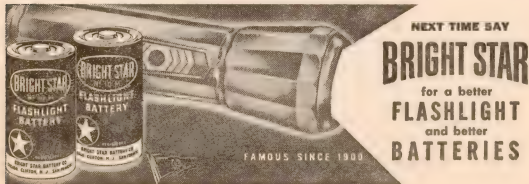
"I'll hurry," she said.

He watched her down the draw and toward the town, a little worried about her free and open approach to it. But then he dismissed his uneasiness. Likely she was wont to come and go like that and persons who might see her wouldn't think anything of it. After watching her disappear among the houses, he settled down for the wait.

LYING on his back beneath the aspen, he stared up at the bits of pale blue sky visible through the greenery. From below, sounds reached up: the bark of a sixgun in the hand of an exuberant cowboy, the spitting of small fire-crackers, and once in a while a boom as a big one went off.

The air was still, and the heat made him drowsy. He fought that off, knowing he must stay awake, safe though he momentarily felt himself. His thoughts went back to Rim City, forty miles to the south. When, three weeks ago, he had broken away from Sheriff Wickers and had made his dash for freedom, he had hit the high spot for the Timburzicon Badlands where he had managed to lose the posse hunting him. Two days ago he had decided things had cooled down enough for him to try to make a get-away. He had intended to leave the country, to ride north, but his horse had broken its leg and he had had to shoot it.

Of the charge of killing his partner, his conscience was clear. He might have given himself up and stood trial, trusting that



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FAMOUS SINCE 1900

right would triumph, had it not been for the fact that he knew for certain that Sheriff Wickers would never let it come to a trial. Dead or alive, the dodgers read; and Wickers would make sure it would be dead. Even in jail he wouldn't be safe, he knew. Too many men had been shot attempting escape, and to frame an attempted jail-break was a cinch for a man like Wickers.

Wade Anders had no illusions about Wickers' reasons for wanting to do away with him. A year ago Wickers had bought a parcel of land adjoining the little place Wade and his partner, Hal Manning, were working. Wickers had made repeated attempts to buy them out and, repeatedly failing, had grown antagonistic. He had tried tricks then, and these too failing, had thought up the final one—the one that had worked!

Wickers knew who had killed Hal Manning, even if he had perhaps not fired the shot himself but had had a hireling do it while he himself sat safely in his office a few doors away. Wade hated Wickers with a consuming hatred. He would have liked to kill him, but he realized that the chances of his getting the crooked lawman before he himself got pegged, were small. The sign wasn't right, he knew. Better to postpone it, say, a year or so. Maybe then he would come back and seek out the murdering star-toter and beat him to the draw, man to man. That had been his plan, vaguely conceived and unsubstantially accepted. But now the girl had come into his life and things had taken on an entirely different slant. He had to think this thing over real careful; maybe the price of vengeance came too high. Maybe he would have to think of some scheme other than an outright shooting match. Maybe there were legal means. . . .

He came awake with a jerk, instantly aware of the fact that he had drowsed off. Something prickly ran over his spine and he came to his feet to stare down the slope toward town. Four men were coming up that slope, coming with determined strides directly for the aspen grove.

The prickly feeling on Wade's spine changed to a chill. It was too late to run, even had there been any concealment to run for. Already he could hear their voices. The only place he could hide was a large patch of ferns growing near by. Hurrying

there, he slid, belly down, among the fronds.

He lay there, his gun in his hand, wondering if the girl had betrayed him. Maybe that five hundred dollars had looked awfully big and desirable to her, once she was safely below. It hurt him to think that, and a sick feeling, more disturbing than the thought of capture or death, came over him. . . .

They came into the grove, firm-footed and confident, talking without stealth. "Aint' no hosses here, Carif," a nasal voice said loudly.

"So I see," another voice said, coldly authoritative. That must be Val Carif, the saloon and dance-hall owner, Wade thought.

There was some more talk, and then a man apparently coming from above called: "Nothin' up here!"

"Maybe," the nasal one ventured, "she just planned on havin' a little picnic all by herself, huh?"

"Too much food for one person," Carif's voice decided.

Wade listened to their talk. They went on, speculating about what Ann Beiloff had had in mind. The general opinion prevailed that she had once again tried to run away, taking advantage of the holiday spirit in town. But the absence of horses, which they evidently had expected finding here, puzzled them. They made no attempt to search the grove minutely, though they tramped around a bit.

What he had heard made Wade feel better. He knew now that Ann had not betrayed him, but that she had been caught trying to take food and water to him.

Carif's voice came again. "You stay here, Kelso. If some jigger shows up, you know what to do."

"Kill him," Kelso said promptly.

"No, you blasted fool! Capture him and bring him in for questioning. Won't you ever learn?"

"I'd rather kill 'em," Kelso grumbled.

"And I," Carif snapped, "want to question 'em first, savvy? See you don't forget it!"

The gunnie growled his obedience to the master's orders, and then the rest tramped from the grove. From below, the noise of festivities came louder and louder on the hot dry air. . . .

SWEAT was trickling down Wade's forehead. It was hot, but more than the heat, his position caused him to perspire. He had lain motionless for a long time, hoping Kelso would succumb to the drowsy atmosphere. First, the gunman had pranced around some, making Wade fear discovery every instant. Finally he had settled down and Wade had watched the smoke of his cigarette spiral upward among the aspen trunks. Now, things were very quiet.

Wade raised his head and peered over the fronds. Kelso sat with his back against a tree, head drooping on his chest.

Wade came upright, stood there a moment or two, watching, and then began to inch toward the drowsing hard-case. He stood near Kelso now, his gun held aloft. He knew he would have to bend the barrel of his gun over the man's skull to put him out of circulation for a spell, but to hit a sleeping man like that went against his grain and he stood there, hesitating. That quirk of conscience nearly cost him his life.

Kelso's eyes suddenly opened, he stared up at Wade; and then, so swiftly that his hand was a blur, he jerked out his gun and shot. His speed proved his undoing. He missed.

Wade felt the bullet brush his neck just below the ear. Then he lashed out, having no compunction now, laying his gun barrel hard against Kelso's skull. The gun-hand wilted like a scythe-struck weed.

With Kelso's own belt, and with strips torn from his shirt, Wade tied him up and deposited him amid the ferns. There was no response to the shot, the blast lost in the medley of noises below.

Purloining the gunnie's tobacco and

paper, Wade rolled himself a quirly. But the smoke didn't taste good, his mouth's dryness spoiling the pleasure.

His thirst was almost torture now. He couldn't hope for the girl bringing relief, and he felt the worse for it. He wondered if he dared sneak toward town and forage for water. There was a cottage standing a little apart, and as he studied the lay of it he saw that by making a little detour and coming up by a path of corn growing in back of it he could approach it unseen from town.

There was, he realized, risk in the venture. But staying here was risky too. Someone might come to contact the guard, and Wade couldn't hope for luck to continually side him. Already his nerves were crawling and his muscles were itchy with the torture of thirst.

He decided to chance it. He had always believed in an active rather than a passive attitude.

Creeping through the brush and coming up by way of a shallow gully, he managed to reach the stand of corn undetected. He was quite near the house now and could see on the back porch a low table on which stood a bucket. A wash pan hung from a nail in the wall, a tin dipper alongside it. The sight was fascinating, drawing his attention like a magnet.

He started inching his way toward it.

On the side of the house stood a black horse hitched to a china-berry tree. The horse hadn't been there when Wade started from the grove, but had recently arrived. Sweat-foam covered its flanks, its legs were dust-caked. It stood with drooping head.

Vaguely, Wade was aware of this; also that the horse seemed oddly familiar. But



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his main thought was centered on that bucket, on how to get there undetected and drink his fill. . . .

He stepped on the porch and a board creaked. He halted. In the house was the muted murmur of voices. He stepped up to the bucket and took down the dipper, ladled it full and drank, the cool fluid like nectar on his tongue.

He was on his second dipper when suddenly inside the sounds became louder with the opening of a door. There were quick light steps, and a voice said, "O-oh," and he saw through the screen of the back door a young woman staring at him. Her hand had gone to her throat, her blue eyes were wide. She was blond and plump and just a little frightened.

Before Wade could reassure her and offer an apology, a man's voice said: "Anything wrong, Nellie?"

That voice caused Wade to jerk out his gun. He had it up and aimed the moment the man stepped into view. Recognition was mutual on the instant. The man unhesitatingly stepped behind the girl, put a forceful arm around her and held her pinned against his brawny chest.

Wade said sharply, "Don't reach for your gun, Wickers!"

THE big sheriff grinned wickedly, his white teeth gleaming back of the thin lips. His spade chin rose above the girl's blond hair, his own black sideburns and mustache and sooty eyes a foil for her light young beauty. He still wore his cream-colored Stetson with the rattlesnake-skin band, the reptile's eyes a pair of red rubies. A bit of a fop was this star-toter from Rim City, having this day elected to spend his celebration in his sweetheart's company, rather than in fruitless pursuit of an elusive quarry. And now the quarry had come to him. . . .

His black eyes gleamed. He said, "Don't be scared, honey, he won't dare shoot you—"

The fright in the girl's wide blue eyes changed to annoyance, then something stronger than that.

Wade said, "The skunk's right, ma'am—" and then he flung himself aside and pivoted and raced to the other side of the house. Momentarily shielded by it, he ran for the nearest buildings, hitting the

alley back of town just as Wicker's gun started blasting behind him. One bullet grooved the ground between his pounding boots, another caromed off a building wall with a howl, screaming its twisted shape upwards. Then Wade spotted an open door and dove into it.

A mild voice said, "No more shaves today—" and halted as Wade's gun muzzle cut short his objection.

He was a short, round-faced man with mild blue eyes and a turnip nose. He said, "Shucks, son, put that smoke-pole away. I'll give yuh a shave. Yuh shore need one."

"I need something else worse," Wade snapped. "I've got to hide—" He looked around, seeking a likely spot.

"Hide?" the little barber gasped. "I thought that shootin' was jest some soused waddie. . . ." He let it hang like that, gaping at Wade, his mild blue eyes worried.

For some inexplicable reason Wade thought of Ann Beiloff then, connecting the girl with the barber. It was as if he sensed a spiritual relationship between these two humans. He blurted, "You know Ann Beiloff?" And, without waiting an answer: "She told me you'd help me hide."

"That girl," the little man commented, shaking his head and looking sad, "will get me in hot water yet. Every time I step into the Mockingbird she sidles up to me—" His mild blue eyes took on a far-away look. "If I was a little younger. . . ."

"Hurry," Wade said.

"Eh? Oh, yes. Right in here." He piloted Wade into a corner partitioned off by a curtain hung from ceiling to floor. It was a kind of clothes closet.

Ensnared in it, Wade heard the hubbub and commotion rise amid the town's festivity-noises: shouted queries and the run of hurrying boots. "Where'd he go? — I think in here! — What's all the row about? . . ." And then a coldly authoritative voice saying, "What's up, Sheriff?"

That was Val Carif, Wade thought. He heard Wickers voice: "Hi there, Carif. That blasted Wade Anders rode into town. I almost had him. He got away from me right here somewhere."

"Wade Anders, eh?" Carif said. "We mustn't let him get away. All right, boys, rat him out. Remember, there's five hun-

dred bucks on him. And free drinks today in the Mockingbird for the feller who bags him." His tone changed as he said to Wickers, "Let's you and me take a peek in the barber shop. Never trusted that Lenn Troust..."

Wickers suddenly cursed. There was the sound of a sodden impact and a pup yelping in hurt yowls. "Damn fool dog," the sheriff's snort came to Wade. "Right in front of me—!"

"Too many mongrels in town," Carif decided. "We need a clean-up."

To that, Wade Anders heartily agreed.

And then there was a violent pounding on the front door. "Open up!" Carif shouted. "Open up, dammit!"

"Just a minutes—just a minute," Lenn Troust quavered. He shuffled over to the door and unlatched it. "Gentlemen," he said, "no more shav—"

His voice choked off, and when Wade peeked through the curtain he saw that Val Carif had the little man by the throat. Wickers had his gun out and had it wagging under the little barber's nose. Carif eased up and hissed, "Well, where've you got him? Talk, you—!"

Wickers' white teeth were gleaming. He said to Carif, "See you still got the old touch."

Lenn Troust quavered, "I—I dunno what you talkin' about..."

Wickers slapped him across the mouth. Blood spurted from the barber's nose, streaming red streaks bright against his gray face.

It was too much for Wade. Gun in hand, he stepped from his hiding place. "All right, you skunks," he snarled. "Hoist 'em! Up—high..."

There was a faint stirring sound behind him, but before he had time to react, something hit him on the back of his head sending waves of darkness rushing over him. He staggered, tried to fight it off. Dimly he was aware of the gun blasting in his hand, the shattering of glass, and then utter blackness claimed him.

WHEN he came to he found himself lying on a stone floor. He staggered to his feet and felt around and found the iron bars of a jail cell. The place was in utter blackness except for a tiny barred window in the back wall through which he

could see the outline of a roof against the star-studded sky.

It was early evening, he guessed. Outside was the sound of merry-making: the hum of many persons abroad, and a constant popping and crackling and exploding as if a minor battle was in progress.

At any other time he would have delighted in these noises, but now the din outraged the ache in his throbbing head. Moreover, being incarcerated was no incentive to produce a mood fittingly commemorative of the holiday. He grimaced at the thought, felt in his shirt pockets, and was pleased to find that the sack of Bull Durham and brown papers and matches had been left him.

He lost no time rolling himself a quiry. Sitting on the cot, he smoked, considering the situation and finding no solace or hope anywhere in it. It was from this melancholy mood the whispered call aroused him: "Hey, Mr. Anders! You in there, Mr. Anders?"

It was a woman's voice, reaching at him through the tiny window. He hauled the cot to it with one muscular sweep and climbed on it peering through the bars. He asked, "That you, Ann?"

"No. This is Nellie Goforth. Watch it. I'm throwing something."

He recognized the voice as that of the girl he had seen with Wickers.

She threw something. It missed. She tried again, and this time something sailed through the little opening to fall on the cot inside. Wade picked it up. It was a giant fire-cracker. He was puzzled, till the girl spoke again.

"It's almost cut in half," she explained. "Break it and pour the powder in the lock of your cell. Use the fuse to light it. It ought to—"

He interrupted her. "Say, that's a swell idea. How'd you think of it?" For the moment he wasn't wondering why she did this for him. His bewilderment came later.

She explained. "I didn't. It was Lenn Troust who thought of it. He couldn't come himself. They beat him up terribly bad." Her voice choked on a sob. She added, "We've got a horse saddled for you."

"Thanks," Wade called back. "Thanks a lot." He was already busy with the fire-cracker.

He broke the cylinder and, reaching through the bars of his cell door, poured the powder into the key hole. He stuck the fuse in the hole, lit it, and hurried back, kneeling behind the cot.

The explosion flung pieces of iron against the wall. Wade rushed out and pushed against the door. It resisted and he stepped back and gave it a kick—hard! The door slammed open with a bang. He ran to the office and by the light of a match discovered his gun and belt hanging from a nail. Buckling them on he strode for the outside door to find it locked.

He got out his gun and waited till loud explosions banged outside; then he shot the lock to pieces. The next instant he was in the open, running for the back of the building.

THE girl was waiting. "Quick," she said breathlessly. "Come with me. I've got the horse back of the livery."

She kept tugging at his arm. "Come quick. Someone may come. . . ."

"No," he said. He hitched up his belt. "I've got a chore to do first. A gun chore."

He looked down at her. "This," he said gravely, "may not turn out to be much of a return for a great favor."

She got the idea instantly. "Wickers, you mean? I hate him. He's got something on dad. He forced me to—to be friendly towards him. But I hate him. You saw what he did—how he used me for a shield; how he kicked that poor puppy; and what he did to Lenn Troust. I don't care if you—" She stopped talking. Her fingers dug into his arm. "Too late," she whispered. "You can't get away now. Here they come. . . ."

She was right. Down the boardwalk came the clomping of several pairs of boots. Men's voices, with those of Wickers and Carif outstanding, rose above the sound.

Wade pushed the girl back. "Try to get some help," he whispered to her, though he wasn't thinking of help but just wanted her out of the way.

From the front of the jail Val Carif's voice began cursing someone. "Fine marshal you turn out to be, leaving your jail door open when I told you—"

"Hell! I locked it!" a whiny voice answered.

There was the scratch of a match as someone lighted the oil lamp and then more and louder cussing. "Dammit, the cell door's busted! He's gone!"

Wade stepped around the door. "Lookin' for someone, gents?"

Wickers and Carif whirled at the sound, both going for their guns like angry rattlers striking. Wade shot Carif through the chest and the saloonman leaped with a wild cry to drop behind the desk.

Wickers' shot took Wade just as the latter moved. The bullet, meant for his heart, creased his side, scoring along his ribs like a red-hot poker, knocking the breath out of him. He staggered, and his next slug tore into the ceiling.

From the hall the town marshal was shooting wildly. Wickers jumped to get out of the drunken fool's crazy range. That gave Wade his chance. His bullet took the crooked star-toter between the eyes, dropping him like a pole-axed steer. In the hall the marshal began hollering for mercy. "I give up—I give up!"

He dropped his gun and came towards Wade, hands elevated. "Don't kill me. I'll tell everything."

Wade could hardly see him, things blurring as they did. He was dimly aware of a surge of people crowding up and wondered what they would do to him. But there was no animosity in the crowd when they found out what had taken place and especially not when the marshal began to tell what he knew of the crooked doings of Val Carif and his pal, Sheriff Wickers.

They slapped Wade on the back. "Feller, you done us a good turn. You rid the valley of a couple of plumb ornery, pole-cats."

Suddenly someone barged through the crowd to reach Wade and he looked up to see Ann Beiloff. "Wade," she said, "how—how are you? They locked me up. I couldn't come. But I busted loose. . . ."

She was pale and tears were running down her cheeks. Her clothes were torn.

He nodded. "Me too," he said. "I busted loose too." He put his arm around her waist. "But we're free now! Free! We don't have to run. We can stay. We can go to my place. And—and we made a deal, didn't we?"

She nodded happily. "Yes," she said. "Yes. We did."



By
Gunnison
Steele

Bardo whirled, his clubbed gun rising and falling — smashing against the oldster's head.

When the Desert Gods Laughed

In the big, blazing middle of that bone-dry oven called Paradise Sink, Silk Bardo, killer, clutched at his only chance to save himself—by condemning a pair of harmless old desert rats to the maddening torture of thirsty death!

LIKE an evil red eye, the winking campfire appeared suddenly on the desert before Silk Bardo. But to the fleeing killer it was a symbol of hope.

Bardo stopped his weary horse, staring warily at the crimson glow. Fire in the desert meant human life; human beings

probably meant water. And Silk Bardo was thirsty, desperate, driven relentlessly by the men on his trail.

After a moment, Bardo rode slowly forward toward the red glow. He licked his dry, cracked lips with anticipation, fingering the gun at his waist. An hour ago

the sun had been a wicked red monster in the brassy sky, flaying him with keen lashes of heat. Paradise Sink, a weird, steaming expanse of sand and lava, had seemed to clutch at him with fiery arms. Then the sun had touched the gaunt mountain spires, lighting their crests like blazing torches, and vanished, and now night shrouded the desert like an inky mist.

Silk Bardo was from the North. He was new to the desert, and the laughing, mocking sound the chill wind made as it swept across the Sink made him shiver.

Slowly the winking fire drew in toward him. Now he could see the figures of two men in the firelight. A hundred yards from the fire he stopped, left the horse among a nest of boulders, and crept forward afoot. In the powdery sand he made no sound at all.

Fifty feet away, just outside the circle of firelight, he paused again. He lay there on his stomach, taking in the scene before him, listening.

TWO old men sat in the firelight. Camping equipment was scattered about. Among the equipment were two large rawhide water bags, and a smaller canteen. Bardo had already spotted a shaggy burro grazing on the sparse vegetation nearby.

Silk Bardo dragged his gaze reluctantly away from the water bags. Obviously the two oldsters were typical desert rats, probably prospectors. One of them was fat, with round, birdlike little eyes. The other was rawboned, patriarchal, with a long white beard.

Bardo started to get stealthily to his feet, then sank back, listening to what the two said.

"I figger we're playin' in luck at last," the fat oldster chuckled. "When we get them samples out to the assayer in Signal, if he don't say they're rich, I'll eat my boots without salt!"

"Mebby so, Sam," the tall one admitted. "They look good. Mebby the find won't make us rich, but we don't crave to be rich. All we want is enough to buy us that little outfit up in the green hills where the wind blows cool and there's allus plenty of water."

"That's a fact. It's a far piece into the desert where we found it. If them samples prove up, we'll sell out to somebody who's

got the money to develop it. I'm anxious to get 'em to the assayer. . . ."

Their talk droned on.

Bardo's attention had sharpened immediately at the mention of samples. He'd killed a man in the attempted bank robbery back in Signal, but so far as money went he had made a water haul. If he got across this hellish desert and onto the isolated Wind River range beyond, he would need money. But gold would be just as good, even if there wasn't much of it.

He got to his feet, gun in hand, and walked quickly into the firelight.

He said flatly, "You two ol' goats behave, if yuh want to live!"

The two desert men looked up quickly as Bardo strode into the firelight, showing small surprise. They looked at his catlike figure, his dark, cruel features and muddy black eyes, at the gun in his hand. Apparently, neither of them was armed.

"Howdy, stranger," Sam, the fat one, said calmly. "You lost, or somethin'?"

"Never mind!" Bardo rapped. "Is that water in them canteens?"

"Sure is. You look thirsty, too. Here, have a swig."

The fat oldster reached for the smallest canteen, handed it to Bardo. Bardo grabbed it and, still watching the two warily, unscrewed the top. He drank noisily and greedily from the half-empty canteen.

"You don't need that gun, mister," the tall one offered. "We're plumb friendly, and glad to have company after four months in the desert. My name's Two-Rivers Shane, and this fat hombre's my pard, Sam Torget."

"I don't give a cuss who you are," Bardo growled. "What you two doin' out here in the desert?"

Sam began, "Why, we're—"

"Just lookin' about," Two-Rivers said quickly. "You headin' into the desert mister? Because if you are, it's a far piece to water."

"Then where'd you get the full bags, if yuh've been out here four months?"

"We know where there's a hole back yonder. But you couldn't find it in a hundred years. You better turn back—"

"Where're the samples?" Bardo demanded.

"What samples?" Two-Rivers asked blandly.

Sam complained, "If you take them two bags of water—"

"I'm takin' 'em! And I've done wasted too much time. My bronc is out there among some cliffs. I'm headin' out, right now. This water'll see me through!"

Bardo up-ended the small canteen again, drank noisily, flung it to the sand empty. Then he stooped to grasp the straps of the two big water bags.

Sam Torget had been sitting with his fat legs doubled under him. Now, with amazing quickness, he lunged at Bardo, his fists flailing.

Bardo whirled. The clubbed gun rose, fell, the barrel smashing against the fat oldster's bald head. Old Sam wilted down to the sand, stunned.

"I ought to fill you both fulla lead!" Bardo grated. "Make another move, and I will!"

Two-Rivers hadn't moved. He stared at Bardo with pale cold eyes, and remained silent.

"If you see them lawmen, tell 'em they'll have to get up a lot earlier to beat Silk Bardo!"

He lifted the two water bags and strode out of the circle of firelight.

MINUTES later, the water bags slung on his saddlehorn, he was riding on across the desert. The crimson glow from the fire died away and vanished behind him. Bardo grinned. The wind was cool against his face. A yellow moon had soared into the sky, making the desert a place of wild, barbaric beauty.

A far cry from a few hours ago, Bardo thought. Then bitter hopelessness had engulfed him. Then the world about him had been a blending of sand and stony spires and blazing sky. The sun had been attacking him with insane ferocity; heat had poured down from the molten sky, boiled up pitilessly from the desert floor.

And he'd been thirsty, terribly thirsty, without water.

His hand caressed one of the cool, damp water bags. He stifed an impulse to drink. Waiting would make the water sweeter. He had plenty. He rode on at a steady pace, and miles slid under his horse's hoofs. He looked about him at the silver-misted desert, only vaguely suspecting the ruth-

less, brutal death that lay beneath that deceptive, unreal beauty.

The sloshing of the water in the bags tantalized him. Finally, unable to resist longer, he stopped. He unscrewed the top from one of the bags. He raised the bag, already savoring the cool sweetness of the water.

He sucked his mouth full, sloshing the liquid about.

Suddenly Silk Bardo got very still. Then, with a violent sound, he spat out the water. The stuff was bitter, acrid, and burned his mouth!

With frantic haste, Bardo uncorked the other bag and tested the water in it. Like that in the first, it was bitter, strong as lye, wholly unfit to drink!

The bags slipped from Bardo's nerveless fingers to the ground, and he could hear the noisy gurgle of the water from their open mouths. He stared wildly about him. And suddenly the moon-misted desert was no longer beautiful, but ugly and sinister, like a grinning skull. The wind sounded like ghostly, mocking laughter. . . .

TWO-RIVERS SHANE and Sam Torget prodded their shaggy old burro slowly on across the desert. They had been quiet for sometime, but now Sam turned to his pardner.

"Ought to reach Indian Springs in a couple more hours. Was water there when we come in, but I reckon the hole's been bonedry for at least a couple of months now."

"Reckon so," Two-Rivers agreed. "That's why we left that can of water buried there in the sand, figurin' we'd maybe be short when we got this far on our way out. That can'll get us out to Signal without any trouble."

"Still and all, it'll be a lot of trouble makin' another trip back into the desert after more samples," the fat little oldster complained. "But Silk Bardo seemed dead set on takin' the ones we had."

"That's a fact," Two-Rivers agreed. He chuckled a little grimly. "I'd kind of like to see his face when he finds out he's got 'em, though. When he finds out it wasn't gold ore we had—but samples of borax water we was bringin' out from our discovery to be assayed!"



"Grab it and start shooting any time!"

The Gun-Pack Strikes by Night!

"Hang together, or we'll hang separately," was the motto of those small-spread cowmen standing back-to-back with their sodbuster former enemies. For the powerful Javelin boss had just delivered his grim ultimatum: "Sell out, or come out—and die!"

By
James Shaffer

A PUZZLED frown creased Hal Weaver's forehead as Rodney J. Merriwell closed the ranch books. "I think the Javelin has shown a good profit the last year or two," Hal said. "A

good return on your investment, Mr. Merriwell."

Merriwell leaned back in the swivel chair and brushed dust from his expensive eastern clothes. He rolled a cigar between his soft, pink fingers, before he bit the end off and touched a match to it.

"Fair," he said. "Fair."

"Fair!" Hal Weaver snapped. He hadn't been able to understand the reason for the Eastern owner's visit to the big, sprawling Javelin ranch. The place was showing a good profit. All his reports had been made promptly, and in good order. And yet Merriwell had come out, anyhow. He'd checked the books over with a fine tooth comb; he'd ridden all over the country in his hired buggy, and he'd pried into everything he could.

"I'd be willing to bet no other investment of yours is showing as good a profit," Hal said testily.

Merriwell got to his feet and began to pace back and forth in the dusty little room that served as the Javelin's office. The morning sun glinted on his polished shoes, and accentuated the pinkness of his clean shaven face.

"That's just it," he said with a short laugh. "I don't have any other investments, Weaver. They pushed me to the wall—a gang of them back on Wall Street wiped me out. Except for the Javelin."

"Sure sorry to hear that, Mr. Merriwell," Hal said. "But you'll get along—you've got the Javelin and she's a money maker. And this climate'll do you good."

"Live in this God-forsaken land!" Merriwell snorted. "Pah!" He stopped his pacing and thumped a soft fat fist on the battered desk. "You don't understand, Weaver. I'm going back to the Street; I'm going to make a come-back. That's why the Javelin has got to make more money. A lot more!"

Hal stood up. It was one thing to do a good job—and he'd done it—on the Javelin. It was another thing for a banker who didn't know how to saddle a horse, to demand the impossible.

"Tain't likely the Javelin can make any more money," he snapped. "Its grass is supporting all the cattle it can."

"Exactly," Merriwell snapped. "So the only answer is—expand. Grow bigger. Take in more territory, more land."

"Fraid that's not possible either," Hal was fast losing his patience. No doubt the Easterner was worried about his losses in the stock market, but why take it out on the Javelin and him? "The Javelin is pretty well hemmed in," he went on, "by a couple of smaller ranches, and mostly by nesters. Homesteaders."

"I'm well aware of that fact," Merriwell said coldly.

"It would cost plenty to buy them out," Hal said.

"Who," Merriwell demanded in that frosty voice, "said anything about *buying* them out?"

Hal sucked his breath in sharply. "Don't guess you know what that would mean," he said slowly. "It would mean war—fighting. Guns."

Merriwell's pink jowls twisted in a sneer. "When I hired you a few years back that was your own recommendation—that you were tough enough to protect the Javelin and make it pay."

"And I did," Hal replied. "I was in trouble many times before the nesters realized that Javelin beef wasn't free. But that's all over now. I've made peace with the nesters. There's been no trouble for a year or more."

"Then they should be unsuspecting when we strike—and strike fast!" Merriwell said in a pleased voice.

Hal felt his guts crawl at the callousness of the man. This was raw; the rawest damn deal he'd ever heard of. He felt the hot blood rush to his face, and wasn't able to fight down the boiling anger within him.

"So it's like that, huh?" he snapped. "They sent you ki-yipping out of the stock market with your tail between your legs! They were too big for you, so now you've got to pick on some one smaller than you. Somebody you know you can bully! Squeeze the life savings out of a lot of hard-working little people so you can go back and play big shot plunger again!"

A spasm of anger twisted across Merriwell's face, like a spoiled brat that's been denied something he wants. Then his pink face smoothed out into a bland smile.

"Now, now, Hal," he said soothingly. "Don't get yourself excited. You're probably thinking of your own little ranch. I know it borders the Javelin. But don't worry about your own place. It'll be safe."

"You're damned right it will be safe," Hal said softly, "because Javelin is not expanding."

Merriwell's eyes became as hard as agates, and his smooth pink face turned a mottled red. His soft fingers crushed the cigar and he flung the shred aside.

"I was afraid you'd be—ah, difficult," Merriwell said in a suave voice. He picked up his hat, placed it carefully on his head and minced out. Hal heard the buggy springs squeak as the banker rode off.

Hal waited a few minutes till his anger cooled, then left the house to give the crew their daily work orders. One by one the crew saddled and rode out to their appointed tasks. All but old Ben Russell. He hung back a moment, and when the last man was out of hearing, he came over.

"What's wrong, Hal?"

"Does it show?" Hal asked with a tight grin, and Ben nodded. Hal took a deep breath and told the oldest of his talk with Merriwell. Old Ben shook his head worriedly and scratched his chin.

He, the same as Hal, had bought himself a small place and was getting it started with Javelin wages. They'd both had trouble with the nesters, and were glad that things were peaceful now.

"Sounds bad, Hal," Ben said dolefully.

"Bad?" Hal echoed. "No, not bad. I was just sore for a minute. Over it now. Heck, there's nothing to worry about. I told him flat out I wouldn't do it, and that ended the matter."

But old Ben continued to shake his head. "Mebbe, mebbe not," he said. "I hope so—but . . ." his voice trailed off and he climbed into the saddle.

Hal shrugged and saddled his own horse. He rode toward the quick sand bogs to the north to check for broken fences, but his mind wasn't on his work. He kept thinking of the cold-blooded, callous way Merriwell had planned to get another stake to finance his stock-market gambling.

HE RETURNED to the ranch at noon, feeling better. He told himself that after Merriwell thought it over, he'd realize what a raw deal he was planning and forget the whole matter. The banker would realize that he wasn't gambling with dollars in a deal like that, but with people's lives. . . .

He pulled his horse up quickly at the

sight of another rider coming up the lane toward the house. He stepped to the ground, and felt the hang of the well worn sixgun on his hip. Feet spread wide, he waited for Mack Sowder to ride up.

"Thought I gave you orders to stay off the Javelin, Sowder," Hal rasped out.

Sowder's beefy face split in a wide, sneering grin. He slouched insolently in the saddle and leered down at Hal. "You the owner of this spread?"

Hal didn't answer. He lunged. Mack Sowder cursed and tried to gig his horse out of range, but Hal got a hold on Sowder's belt and pulled. Sowder tried to cling to the saddle; he tried to get his gun out, but he was unsuccessful in both. He hit the ground heavily and came to his feet with fists swinging.

Hal sidestepped quickly and drove a hard right into the man's stomach. Sowder grunted and gave ground, and Hal followed him relentlessly, keeping the man off balance and giving him no chance to pull a gun.

"Stop that!"

It wasn't until Merriwell yelled that Hal was aware that the banker had ridden up in his buggy. The banker hopped to the ground and hurried over. Mac Sowder wiped a bloody nose with his shirt sleeve, his eyes glaring hatred and triumph.

"You shouldn't have stopped me," Hal grunted. "Sowder knows he's not supposed to come on Javelin property. He's too damn handy with his guns. That's why I fired him a while back."

"Tell him, Mr. Merriwell," Sowder grunted.

The sneering triumph in Mac Sowder's voice jerked Hal up straight. He felt his face go hot with embarrassment, and Merriwell's words, though no surprise, were still a shock.

"Apparently you've grown too soft to run the Javelin as I want it run," Merriwell said coldly. "I gave you orders this morning that you refused to carry out, so I hired a man that would obey orders."

Hal let that sink in for a few minutes, and when he spoke, his voice was slow and measured.

"Let me get this straight—you're hiring Mack Sowder to carry out that plan you told me about this morning, is that it?"

Merriwell nodded briskly. "As I told

you, Weaver, the Javelin has got to make more money. I need a stake to buck the Street again."

"And you've hired Mack Sowder, a professional gunman to do the job for you!" Hal blurted. "You fool! You blundering fool! Sowder doesn't care about making the Javelin show a profit. He's out to settle old grudges he's got. He'll—"

"That's enough, Weaver!" Sowder snarled, and his gun leaped from its holster, the gaping muzzle centering on Hal's stomach. "Mr. Merriwell has been finding out quite a few things since he's been here. And one of them is, how your little ranch has prospered—it being next to the Javelin—and you bossing the Javelin!"

Hal sucked his breath in sharply, and his eyes became mere slits. He leaned forward on the balls of his feet, ignoring the gun pointed at him.

"You trying to say I'm crooked, Sowder?" he asked in clipped tones. Sowder's laugh grated harshly on his ears. "Take my advice, Weaver. Sell out to the Javelin before you get run out! That's all! Now get going!"

THE barn was hot and stuffy, as gunny sacks had been hung over all openings to keep the light of the lanterns from shining out. Hal Weaver climbed up on a packing box, and looked down into the rows of upturned faces.

He and Ben Russell had spent the whole afternoon in the saddle, riding around and calling a meeting of the nesters. They were all here, Hal thought, noting their expressions. Some were curious; some were grim; and others frankly hostile. It brought back memories of bitter clashes he'd had with these same men.

"You all know why Ben and I called you together tonight," Hal said. "But maybe I'd better tell you the whole story." He told them of Merriwell's visit; the banker's disaster in Wall Street, and his determination to make the Javelin pay big money.

"When I refused to start today," he went on, "Merriwell hired Mac Sowder. I don't have to tell you what Sowder is, or what he intends to do. He's already fired most of the old Javelin crew, and hired new men. Men of the same stripe as himself. Sowder means business."

"So we heard," a dry voice spoke up, and

Hal noticed that it belonged to Gussy Higgins. "But I don't see how it concerns us."

Hal frowned. "What do you mean by that, Gussy?"

"Just this," Higgins stood up and spoke loudly. "Sowder told you he intended to take over your little ranch, and that of Ben Russell, too. He accused you of building up your place at the expense of the Javelin, and he told you he aimed to stop that."

"Sure he did," Hal agreed. "He had to have something to convince Merriwell to fire me."

"How do we know it ain't true?" Gussy demanded. "How do we know that you ain't organizing us nesters to protect you, to pull your chestnuts out of the fire? It'll be your ranch and that of Ben Russell that the Javelin will want. They won't want our plowed ground!"

A low mutter of doubt ran through the work-gnarled nesters, and Hal realized that the old distrust of the Javelin, or any cattleman, was still strong in them.

"The Javelin is out to take over everything in sight!" Hal argued. "Me and Ben might be first—I don't know. But sooner or later, the Javelin will be after all of you. And if we don't stand together. . . ."

"How do we know the Javelin is out after us?" Gussy demanded, and two or three voices chorused approval. "We got no word except yours." He turned to the rest of the crowd. "If we follow Weaver's words, we're going hunting for trouble. After all, what's happened today?" He paused a minute. "I'll tell you what's happened. Nothing, except Hal Weaver got fired from his soft job! That's all. He's sore about it, and wants to band us together so's we can help him get his revenge!"

A loud chorus of approval greeted his words, and men began to get to their feet. Hal waved his arms and yelled for silence, but a chorus of boos greeted his attempts. Gussy Higgins' voice floated to him through the hubbub, and Hal caught the words, "damn cattlemen—let 'em fight their own wars—"

"Gussy, damn you!" Hal started forcing his way toward the nester, but old Ben Russel caught his arm.

"It ain't time, Hal," the oldster argued. "You can't do any more tonight. Only thing to do is wait for the Javelin to make the first move; then we can organize them."

"It'll be too late when the Javelin starts moving," Hal snapped. "The fools! Can't they understand the danger?"

"Nope," Ben Russel said. "They won't recognize it till it rises up and smacks them in the face—and then it might be too late!"

And it wasn't slow in coming. Two days later one of the old Javelin crew stopped by Hal's place. The rider had his bedroll tied behind his saddle.

"Drew my time," he stated shortly. "Drifting south looking for a decent job. Heard the news?"

Hal stiffened. "No! What news?"

"Sowder's made the first move. He offered to buy out Jim Dolan's homestead. It's got a crick running through it. Dolan refused to sell. Sowder made some insulting remarks and, well, Dolan took it up. They argued, and Sowder gave Dolan till three this afternoon to leave town."

"Sheriff Tampas aims to stop it, don't he?" Hal demanded.

"Dunno. You know the sheriff, kinda wishy-washy. He talked to Dolan and Sowder both, but I don't think nothing came of it."

Hal didn't wait to hear more. He flung a saddle on his fastest horse and spurred for Ben Russel's place. The oldest lost no time saddling his own mount and they rode for town.

They hit Norris City at two-thirty. Hal kept his horse in a fast lope till he reached the sheriff's office, and leaped from the saddle as the horse came to a sliding halt. He burst into the sheriff's office with Ben Russel on his heels.

"This fight," he snapped, "You're stopping it?"

Sheriff Tampas shifted his chewing tobacco to the other cheek and shifted nervously. "I talked to Dolan and Sowder both," he said jerkily.

"Talked?" Hal ripped out. "You know what it'll take to stop Mac Sowder—throw him in jail and let him rot there till this thing blows over!"

"And on what charge would you hold Sowder?" a cool voice broke in from the doorway. Rodney Merriwell stepped inside, smiling blandly. "Good morning, Sheriff," he said heartily.

"Why, good morning, Mr. Merriwell," Sheriff Tampas said, "Here, have this chair. It's the most comfortable."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Ben Russel said disgustedly. "So that's the way things stack up!"

Hal laughed. "A politician to the last, eh, Sheriff? You've already picked the winning side, and have switched over to them."

The presence of Merriwell had caused a change in the sheriff. He shoved out his chest and assumed an important air. "Now, listen, Weaver, when you were running the Javelin, you were an important man around here, but now—"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Ben Russel repeated again.

"To hell with who I was, or am now!" Hal shouted. "You're shutting your eyes to murder out there! You'll be just as responsible for Dolan's murder as if you pulled the trigger!"

"Murder?" Rodney J. Merriwell quirked his eyebrow. "That's an ugly word. I'd hardly call it murder—it's just playing the game according to the local rules."

"You better stay out of this, Merriwell!" Hal warned.

"Stay out of it?" Merriwell smiled. "After all, I'm in this, too. I own the Javelin, you know. And I resent the word murder. What Sowder is doing is considered fair and square. Two men have their differences, and they settle it with guns."

HAL started to retort when a woman's scream ripped through the town. Hal had been so intent on the argument there in the office, that he hadn't noticed the silence that had settled over Norris City. Now he wheeled toward the door; his gun lifting from its holster. But before he could rip the door open, the blast of a sixgun shattered the silence.

He heard a man's high-pitched yell of pain, and then he got the door open. The sight in the street tied his stomach into a hard knot of hate. Jim Dolan was slumped in the dust of the street, one hand clutching a spreading red blotch in his side, the other hand trying pitifully to lift a gun that was too heavy.

Mac Sowder was walking slowly down the street; eyes narrowed to cruel slits, and his smoking sixgun rising with insolent casualness for the killing shot.

But before he could fire, a figure darted

from a store and raced out into the street. It was Jim Dolan's wife, and she put her arm around her husband to keep him from falling into the dust. Sowder hesitated a moment, then jammed his gun into leather and walked off.

Sheriff Tampas and Merriwell came out of the office and stood behind Hal and Ben Russell. Merriwell's voice was smoothly triumphant.

"I don't believe Javelin's expansion program will run into much opposition from now on," he told the lawman.

Hal shot a glance at old Ben Russell and then moved out of earshot.

"Take a look up and down the street, Ben," he said. "What'dya see?"

"Don't hafta look," Russell said harshly. "I've counted eight already. Gunslingers, every one of them. And every one of them riding a Javelin cayuse."

Hal nodded, then said, "Ease out of town as quick as you can without attracting attention. Pass the word to all nesters to meet in Gussy Higgins' barn tonight. And keep the meeting secret!"

There was a different feeling in the air that night, when Hal mounted the packing box. The barn was silent, except for the heavy breathing of the men inside.

"Jim Dolan didn't die," Hal said. "His wife saved him by running out in the street, but Dolan sold out to Javelin for one dollar!"

"And Rodney Merriwell's word that he could leave the country in safety," Ben Russell added.

"I reckon we know where we stand now," Hal went on. "We saw what Sheriff Tampas plans to do, which is nothing. And we saw what Mac Sowder plans to do. The same as he did to Jim Dolan, unless we hit—and hit first!"

He looked over their faces and felt grimly satisfied at the cold determination on their faces. He looked at Gussy Higgins, in the front row.

"Gussy, you were against me the other night, figuring the Javelin didn't mean business. Don't reckon there's any objections tonight, is there?"

Higgins shrugged. "What your plan, Hal?"

"Hit, and hit first!" Hal snapped. "Tonight—right now! We've all got horses and we're all armed. And every minute we

delay, more gunmen are riding in and strengthening the Javelin!"

There was a mutter of approval through the crowd. Men began to check their weapons; waiting for Hal to continue.

"I—I think we oughta take more time and think this thing over," Gussy Higgins said. "After all—if we go off half-cocked—"

"We're not going off half-cocked!" Ben Russel broke in. "Me'n Hal has the whole thing planned. We know the Javelin like the palm of our hand, and we'll tell you the plan as we ride along. C'mon, men, let's ride."

The oldest started moving toward the door, but Gussy Higgins wasn't through yet. "I'd rather hear the plan right here," he argued. "So's we c'n pick out any flaws in it."

"Flaws, hell!" Ben Russel exploded. "There ain't none; and the longer we wait here the more danger we're in of Sowder finding out about our meeting."

"I want to know what I'm riding into," Gussy Higgins insisted stubbornly.

Jess Argabright spoke up haltingly. "Uh—maybe Gussy's right," he mumbled. "After all, I got a family. . . . Oughta know what kinda risk I'm running—"

The wrangling started, with Ben Russel arguing to start immediately, and Gussy Higgins loudly demanding to know what the plan was, and what danger he was riding into. Hal cursed the delay as the argument grew more general and their voices louder and more insistent. Finally he sprang back on the box.

"All right, all right," he shouted over the din. "Here's my plan. Let's go over it quick! Sowder's no fool—he must know we'd do something about the Dolan shooting, and if he was to catch us cooped up in this barn. . . ."

"Which is exactly what has happened!" a raucous voice broke in. Cool air gusted through the barn as the big door was swung wide and Mack Sowder stood there, twin guns leveled at the crowd. "Go ahead, Weaver," Sowder jeered as Hal's hand dived for his gun. "Try it!"

Hal's hand fell away. Crowding in behind Sowder were the Javelin's gun-crew, the men he'd seen in town that day. Their guns drawn, they pushed past Sowder and strode inside.

"Collect all the guns, boys. Defang every blasted one of them," Sowder ordered. "No, wait," he chuckled. "Let Weaver and Russel keep their guns. They might need them in the next day or two," he added, laughing. "Get that, Weaver?"

The muscles along Hal's jaw were a hard ridge. "I got it, Sowder."

Sowder chuckled as Rody Merriwell stepped alongside him. "Want me to tell 'em, boss?"

"I'll do it myself," Merriwell said, and faced the crowd of sullen homesteaders.

"I'll be stopping at the Norris City Hotel for the next three days—and I have the necessary papers drawn up for each one of you. All ready for your signatures." He smiled, and the lantern light sparkled on his pink cheeks. "Of course, if you prefer not to sign the papers, Mack Sowder will return your gun for—ah—certain obvious reasons."

Sowder's braying laugh rang through the barn at that, and gunmen swiftly finished their work. The nesters stood by helplessly as the men collected their guns and left the barn. Hal heard buggy springs squeak as Merriwell climbed in, and the banker's voice floated back.

"We'll all ride back by way of the road," Merriwell ordered. "I prefer not to be riding around this country alone right at the present time."

"You got nothing to worry about, but we'll stick close," Mack Sowder said loudly, and the buggy and horsemen moved off, their sounds dying in the distance.

THE nesters stood around in the barn for a few minutes, as if too stunned to realize what had happened. Finally, one man cursed savagely and stomped out. Hal watched them gradually drift away then; some with savage hatred on their faces; others still dazed by the swiftness with which the disaster had overtaken them, and the rest with dull defeat deadening their features. After a few moments, there were only Hal, Ben Russell and Gussy Higgins left.

"Reckon I might as well go in and go to bed," Gussy said. "You fellows blow out the lantern when you leave." He walked out, leaving only Ben and Hal there in the dim lantern light.

"There was a traitor among us tonight,

Ben," Hal said. "Somebody tipped Mac Sowder off."

"That's what I was thinking," Ben said. "I'd like to lay my hands on him!"

"I'd rather lay my hands on some guns," Hal said. "Now would be the time to hit the Javelin, when they're not expecting it."

Ben laughed sarcastically. "We still got our own guns," he said. "Then there's my rifle at home, and a spare sixgun."

They had reached their horses, and Hal paused with his foot in the stirrup. "That's it, Ben!" he said. "We've enough guns!"

"Huh?" Ben grunted. "Listen, Hal, if they was a chance in hell of beating the Javelin, I'd ride in with just you and me—but there ain't. Even with those spare guns of mine, it's be suicide!"

"Yeah, you're right, Ben—except we're only going to make the Javelin think we're attacking," Hal spoke rapidly. "Listen, Ben, ride by your place and pick up those guns, then ride for the Javelin. Start shooting those guns. Make all the noise you can, then ride like hell and toll that crew away from the Javelin."

Ben's eyes gleamed with excitement in the darkness. "I gotcha!" he grunted and swung into the saddle.

Hal rode slowly toward the Javelin, giving Ben plenty of time to ride past his ranch and pick up the spare guns. A quarter of a mile from the big ranch house, he slipped to the ground and continued on foot. He knew every step of the way, and he reached the back porch of the ranch house in silence. He hunkered down there in the shadows and waited, counting off the minutes it would take Ben to arrive.

A horse nickered down in one of the corals, and Hal stood up, ready. A moment later, gun thunder rolled through the night. Old Ben Russel punctuated his shots with loud screeches and yells. He flung lead at the bunk house as fast as he could trigger.

For a moment, the Javelin lay quiet under the racket, then the bunk house came alive with yelling, cursing men. The door flung open and men raced out, their guns lancing flame in the general direction of Ben.

"Saddle up!" Mac Sowder roared. "If they want a fight, we'll give it to 'em. We'll wipe 'em out tonight!"

"Where'n hell did they get guns?" a man yelled angrily.

Sowder shut him up with a snarling curse. "Never mind. They got 'em, and that gives us all the excuse we need to finish 'em off!"

An upstairs window of the ranch-house flung open. "Don't come back till you've finished the job this time, Sowder!" Rodney Merriwell shouted. Sowder bellowed a reply, and the gun hung crew hit the saddle. The firing was still continuing from the lower corrals, as Ben Russel burned gun powder. As the Javelin crew hit leather, the firing stopped. Hal breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that old Ben would be hard to catch.

He turned and opened the back door. His boots pounded hollowly along the hallway, then he started up the steps.

"Who's that?" Merriwell yelled nervously. "Answer, whoever you are!"

Hal had reached the top landing. He stalked along the hall, now, toward the door to Merriwell's room.

"Sure, Merriwell," he said pleasantly. "It's me, Hal Weaver."

He flung the door open and stepped inside, pulling the door shut after him. Dimly, he could see the banker huddled on the side of the bed in his night shirt. Hal grinned as he struck a match and touched it to the lamp.

"What're you doing here?" Merriwell stammered. "Sowder'll kill you. . ."

Hal laughed. "Sowder's out on a wild goose chase that'll keep him busy for three or four hours."

"Wild goose chase?" the banker's eyes were bright pin points of fear. "What're you talking about?" But the expression in his eyes told Hal that the banker had already guessed.

"We're going to settle our differences, Merriwell. You and I. And we'll do it according to the local rules. I believe they're your own words, aren't they?"

Merriwell stared. The pinkness had left his cheeks. They were pasty white now; white and sagging. His eyes widened as he saw Hal's hand lift one of the guns around his waist from its holster and offer it, butt foremost, to him.

"There you are, Merriwell," Hal said softly. "Grab it and start shooting any time."

Merriwell shrank from the gun as if it were a snake. "No," he breathed. "No!

That would be murder! I'm no gunman—I've never fired one of those things in my life! It would be murder!"

"Murder? That's an ugly word," Hal mocked. "I've got a damn good memory, Merriwell. They are your very words the day Mac Sowder shot Jim Dolan down in cold blood. It was done according to the local rules, you said. When two men had differences, they met in the street and shot it out, is what you told me. Take the gun, Merriwell!"

"No!" The banker edged farther from the weapon, his fat jowls quivering with fear.

"I'm surprised," Hal said softly. "The day Sowder shot Dolan, you seemed right pleased with the 'local rules' that allowed such a thing. Don't those rules apply to you and me, Merriwell? We have a difference of opinion, so let's settle it. Reach for it, Merriwell!"

The banker's paunch was heaving with his heavy, fearful breathing. "What do you want of me?"

"I want you to put your clothes on and come to Norris City with me," Hal said quickly. "We'll leave before Sowder and the crew get back. In town you can write Sowder a letter firing him, and then you catch a train back East—"

HE BROKE off as the faint hoofbeats sounded in the distance. He listened a moment, and as they drew nearer, he could hear Mac Sowder's voice. The crew was returning.

"Ye-es," Merriwell sneered. "As you were saying?"

Hal reversed the gun in his hand. There was a tight grin on his face. "It looks like you and me might go to hell together, Merriwell!" he grinned.

"Now, wait a minute—" Merriwell started, and the horses drew up in front of the house. Mac Sowder's voice lifted in a yell.

"Weaver!" he yelled. "You coming out, or do we come in after you?"

"Sowder!" Merriwell rushed to the window. "Be careful, man! This killer has me in his power! Bargain with him. Get me out of here before you start shooting."

"What for?" Sowder asked insolently. "It would be too bad if you both got killed, wouldn't it? Weaver would get blamed for

it and well, me and the boys would run the javelin our way till your heirs took over—what there was left of the place."

That remark brought a laugh from the crew, and Hal stiffened at the sound of one of those guffaws.

"Gussy Higgins!" he yelled. "Is that you?"

"Damn right!" Gussy answered with a laugh. "There's more money in this than homesteading."

"Cut the palaver!" Mac Sowder ordered. "Let's take 'em!"

"Blow the lamp out," Hal ordered, "and keep low."

Boots were thumping on the front porch below. In another moment, they'd be coming up the stairs. He'd get some of them. He hoped he'd get a shot at Sowder, and maybe Gussy Higgins—

"Now, boys, give 'em hell!"

The familiar voice rang out from the bunk-house. It was followed by a thunderous volley of gunfire. The gunmen on the porch were caught flatfooted. They turned and tried to answer the fire, but only for a moment. Hal charged down the steps, guns ready, but when he reached the ground, it was all over.

Ben Russel and a bunch of grim-eyed nesters had surrounded the gunmen. By the light of lanterns, they were disarming the javelin crew. Hal looked down on the

still forms of Mac Sowder and Gussy Higgins.

"They tried to make a fight of it," Ben Russell said grimly.

Hal was still puzzled. He scratched his head. "How in the thunder—"

"Simple," Ben Russel cut in. "When I left Higgins' place, I had a feeling somebody was following me. It was Gussy. I tried to grab him, but he got away. So then I figured out a scheme of my own. I rounded up all the nesters I could in a hurry and came on over. I started shooting as per plan and the minute the crew left the bunk-house, all of us sneaked up there and got our guns back. They were all in a pile in the bunk-house."

"Then when Gussy met the crew a mile or so from the ranch and turned them back," Jess Argabright broke in, "we were ready and waiting for them."

"And that looks like it cleans the whole works up," Hal chuckled.

"Not quite," Ben Russel growled, as Rodney Merriwell came out on the porch, hastily pulling his pants over his night-shirt. "There's a little matter of some papers to sign; and he'll do the signing."

"Yeah," Jess Argabright said. "We talked it over. Us homesteaders would like to loan you and Ben Russel the money to buy the javelin, Hal. We figure if you two owned it we'd have peace around here."

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Monte heaved forward as Leedom's sixgun blasted splinters from the heavy table.

CHAPTER ONE

Last of the Breed

OLD CRAW SPAULDING was dying in the saddle when his clay-bank gelding brought him back to the Circle S ranch house which had been the aging cattle king's citadel for a generation.

The back of his brushpopper jumper was soaked with blood. There was a bullet hole where his suspenders crossed. Only the thong tying him to the saddle horn had kept him from tumbling out of his stirrups.

The Winchester was missing from its scabbard under his right saddle fender. He had dropped the rifle back in Mescal Canyon, a few seconds after the bushwhacker's slug had shattered his spine.

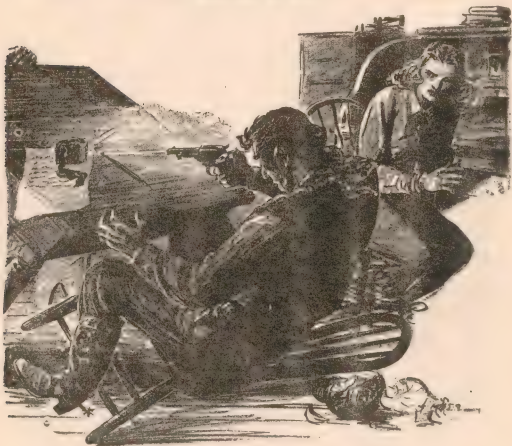
The bullet was nearly spent when it hit him, or he would have died instantly. But it was enough to paralyze him from the waist down and blur his normally eagle-keen vision.

After he dropped the .30-30, Old Craw had reasoned things out with cold logic. Whoever had 'gulched him had done so at long range. If he dismounted to recover his Winchester, he wouldn't be able to

RANCH

By Walker
A. Tompkins

The Circle S held open house to as tough and ornery a bunch of bushwhack renegades as ever wrecked a spread, after old Craw Spaulding cashed in. . . . For that famous outfit was to have, as its new boss, Craw's no-good, black-sheep son, who would last on that bloodstained range just ten seconds less than a snowball in hell!



sight his ambusher anyway. And with his legs numb and useless, it was certain he wouldn't be able to remount his claybank again.

So, for the first time in the seventy-six tempestuous years of his life, both as an Arizona Ranger and a big-spread cowman, Old Craw decided not to fight back. He cut a saddle string with his jackknife, lashed

his left wrist to the Brazos horn, and trusted to luck and the instinct of his mount to get him back to the Circle S before he played out his string. . . .

Aw Gwan, the ancient Chinese cook, was emptying a pan of spud peelings in the hog trough when he caught sight of the boss slumped over his saddle, alongside the porch.

The cook's screech brought Otie Leedom, the Circle S foreman, running from the nearest barn. With him came Vance Carver, the white-haired old lawyer who had driven out from Trigo aboard his democrat wagon a few minutes before.

"Fetch some boiling water and clean rags into Craw's bedroom!" Carver ordered the Chinaman, helping Leedom cut the rawhide thong and slide the unconscious ranchman out of the saddle. "He's still breathing!"

It was a two man job carrying Old Craw to his bed, for the one-time Ranger captain still scaled around one-eighty despite the decay of the years. Carver was snipping off the oldster's blood-soaked underwear with a pair of shears when Aw Gwan shuffled in with a bowl of steaming water and a bundle of bleached flour sacks.

"My team's still hitched to the buckboard," Carver said to the trembling cook. "You larrup them back to town, Gwan, and fetch Doc Seilers. You might bring the sheriff back too."

A hoarse whisper from the bed halted Aw Gwan at the door.

"Save yourself a trip, you old heathen," Spaulding wheezed. "My sand is runnin' out fast. I want you here to see me off."

Carver and the foreman put a compress on the bullet wound to stem the flow of blood, but they knew Old Craw was going fast.

Only by a miracle had the old man regained consciousness, and he was clinging to it with the same tenacity that had seen him build the Circle S homestead up to the biggest spread in Arizona. But the tireless zeal that had put him twice into the territorial legislature, the driving will that had made him the first citizen of Concha County—these achievements had been nullified by a lead pellet the size of a man's little fingertip . . .

"There's no use tryin' to fool you, boss," Leedom said hoarsely, ignoring the lawyer's signals to keep quiet. "You won't last out the hour . . . Any idea who 'bushed you?"

Spaulding shook his head, his stubbled jaw making a scratchy noise on the pillow.

"Man in my position . . . got lots of enemies," Spaulding whispered. "Happened in Mescal Canyon on my way back . . . from town. Somebody with a long gun,

shootin' from . . . the north rim. Carver . . . I want to talk . . . while I can. I want the Circle S to go to Monte. He's a black sheep and a hellion and I ain't seen him for ten-eleven years. But he's got good Spaulding blood in him. He's got to have. He's the . . . last of the breed."

Leedom raced out to the bunkhouse and brought back a demijohn of whiskey and a glass. He poured a slug of the liquor and wet the old man's crimson-flecked lips with it, but Spaulding refused to swallow any of the whiskey.

"That stuff . . . was the ruin of my son . . . that and bad company," he husked out, with no trace of the old bitterness in his voice. "No use—relyin' on that . . . now. Just addle—what wits I got left."

Otie Leedom swallowed hard, his eyes meeting the lawyer's across the bed. Leedom was a hard-bitten cowpuncher in his early forties, who had risen from a bronc wrangler to be Old Craw's trail boss and segundo.

"Monte's a drunken sot and a no-good," the foreman said with his usual bluntness. "He'll run the Circle S into the ground inside of a year, Craw."

Carver clasped the dying man's icy hand between his own, staring angrily at Otie Leedom.

"Perhaps," he said gently, "having the responsibility of the ranch will make a new man out of Monte."

He spoke with an assurance he didn't feel. Crawford Spaulding had banished his wastrel, hell-raising son eleven years ago this spring after he caught the kid running wild with a known rustler outfit. He had warned Monte Spaulding never to set foot on Circle S range again unless he quit drinking and gambling. Young Monte had finally wound up in Deadwood, South Dakota, and neither man had yielded an iota in the years that sped by . . .

A HUSH descended on the room, broken only by Spaulding's raucous breathing and the stifled sobs of Aw Gwan, who had been the oldster's faithful servant for over forty years.

"I'd always hoped," Spaulding went on in his ebbing whisper, "that Monte and your girl Rona would team up, Vance. She's a fine thoroughbred of a girl. She'd be . . . the makings . . . of Monte."

Tears were in Vance Carver's eyes. The two men were of similar ages, and Spaulding had put explicit trust in the Trigo lawyer ever since the days when Carver had helped him file on the homestead which he had expanded into the mighty Circle S.

"Don't worry about anything," Carver said brokenly. "I wish—there were time to send for Monte. He's a fine boy."

Spaulding closed his eyes, a grin twitching the corners of his mouth.

"Yeah. A fine boy. Reckon I was too hard on him. See it now. Last . . . of the Spauldings . . ."

He was still wearing the grin when he lapsed into a coma. Carver and the Circle S foreman kept their bedside vigil until it was over, forty minutes later.

Vance Carver pulled a sheet over the dead man, with the feeling that he was drawing the curtain that closed an epoch, a period spelling finis to a career that had been closely interwoven with the development of Arizona Territory.

Aw Gwan fled sobbing to spread the news. There was a sizeable crowd of sober-faced punchers gathered on the porch, Stetsons in hand, when Carver and the foreman came outside.

"Your boss has gone," the silvery-haired old lawyer confirmed the news. "I'll send the coroner and a minister out from Trigo and we'll bury him down by his wife's grave this evening . . . Meanwhile Leedom here is in charge, until such time as Montgomery Spaulding gets here from South Dakota to take over. I know you'll all carry on, the same as if Crow were here."

After Vance Carver had set off for town in his spring wagon, Otie Leedom saddled up a fast bay and headed up the Mescal Canyon trail, following the splashes of blood which marked the route of Old Crow's last tragic homecoming.

Leedom shed the mask of grief he had worn back at the deathbed, and his hard face set in complacent lines as he sent the bay up the rimrock cut-off that led to Trigo.

As he lay dying, Old Crow had said in the hearing of Vance Carver and the Chinese cook that his killer had been ambushed on the north rim toward which Leedom was now headed. Spaulding's mistake made up for his having lived to reach home. For Otie Leedom had rested his rifle on the south rim of the canyon when he had

squeezed off the shot that doomed a dynasty . . .

He put Mescal Canyon behind him and dipped down the slope into Pedragosa Valley. The roofs of Trigo showed as a brown blotch in the distance against the shimmering haze that covered the vast treeless sageland.

The short-cut put him into the cowtown a full hour ahead of Vance Carver, who was taking the longer wagon road out of the foothills. Halting at the Overland Telegraph office, Leedom dispatched a brief message to one Blaine Farnum, Red Front Saloon, Deadwood, South Dakota—a message he had composed weeks before the time was ripe for Crow Spaulding's murder.

Then Leedom visited the county jail and broke the news of the cattle king's death to Sheriff Jess Grewman. They might cut the killer's sign on the north rim where Old Crow thought his ambusher had been hiding. . . .

MONTE SPAULDING sat at a deserted poker table in the rear of Blaine Farnum's saloon in Deadwood, trying to drink himself into oblivion. Between pulls at the bottle of rye, he tried to focus his red-bleared eyes on the two slips of paper which the Overland Telegraph operator had brought him an hour ago, over at his cousin Jethrow Karnes' livery barn where he worked.

The first message was from old Vance Carver, his father's lawyer. It informed him that Old Crow was dead, his killer as yet at large; that under the terms of his father's bequest, Monte was now sole owner of the vast cattle empire which Spaulding had built up through the years. And it urged him to return to Arizona as soon as possible.

The news had left Monte Spaulding with a numb coldness in the pit of his guts. It tempered the old bitterness he had held for his hard-bitten sire through the years, brought a sense of overpowering loss and the first vague stirrings of shame and remorse that he had felt in a decade.

But it was Rona Carver's telegram which had driven him to seek refuge in the Red Front Saloon. It was the message from the lawyer's daughter which he now held in a shaky hand, trying to focus his blurring eyes on the telegrapher's scrawl:

Now that your father is gone you must let bygones be bygones, Monte. Perhaps my love for you will be stronger than your stubborn pride. But whatever may be your decision, you know that I will be waiting, as always, for your return.

Monte Spaulding reared to his feet, stuffing the telegrams into a pocket of his levis. He caught sight of his reflection in the blistered backbar mirror, and the image sent a feeling of revulsion sweeping through him.

At thirty, his face bore the sagging lines of dissipation and prodigal living. He had the makings of a beer belly and his jaw was furred with its usual three-day growth of stubble. The firm mouth he had inherited from Old Crow was somehow flabby and petulant. And his eyes. . . .

With an oath, Spaulding turned and snatched up the half-filled bottle. He lurched across the barroom, ignoring the contempt he saw in Blaine Farnum's slitted glance.

"When y'expect your cousin back from Rapid City, Monte?" demanded the saloon keeper, pausing in the act of mopping the mahogany counter with his bar rag. "I got a telegram for him."

Spaulding shrugged indifferently, tucking the whiskey bottle under his arm and weaving unsteadily toward the swinging batwings.

"Jet's buyin' winter feed," he said thickly. "Should be back on tonight's stage, I reckon."

Farnum's loathing stare followed him out the slatted doors. . . .

He made his uncertain way to the Black Hills livery stable, pausing to cuss out the Injun buck who was currying down a customer's saddle mare. Then he lurched his way up to the partitioned off room in the meagerly furnished hayloft where he and his cousin lived.

Monte stretched out on the cot there and closed his eyes, trying to summon up a memory of Rona Carver as he had known her last. She had been sixteen to his nineteen the spring he and Crow Spaulding had had their run-in and Monte had pulled stakes. Finally he had accepted his cousin Jet Karnes' offer to be a hostler in his Deadwood stakes.

Rona would be twenty seven now. In the intervening years he had had occasional

letters from the girl, even from the college in Texas where she had studied law, going back to her home in Trigo to join her father's practise.

And she hadn't married. Love could do strange things to a woman, especially one of Rona Carver's beauty and breeding. Waiting for a black sheep buckaroo who had disgraced his birthright and had joined up briefly with a longrider gang before he attained his majority. And yet Old Crow hadn't disowned him—

But it was too late, too late. Spaulding staggered to his feet, took a long swig of whiskey, and then with a savage impulse hurled the bottle against the wall behind his bed, showering the blankets with glass and filling the stuffy room with the biting fumes of cheap bar liquor.

. . . He was stretched out on the bed like a dead man when his cousin Jet got in that night from Rapid City. Jethrow Karnes lit the oil lamp and stood staring in disgust at the snoring, stupified figure sprawl on the bed.

A YEAR Monte's senior, Jet Karnes looked enough like his cousin to have been a twin brother. From his mother, Old Crow Spaulding's sister, Jet had inherited the Spaulding stature, the clean-chiseled features, the penetrating blue eyes. But the resemblance was only a physical one. From his own sire, old Cole Karnes, he had inherited the same crooked streak that had cost old Cole his life at the end of a hangman's rope here in Deadwood twenty years ago. . . .

Jet Karnes threw open a window to let out the sickening stench of cheap whiskey that permeated the bedroom. He was rolling a cigarette when he heard boots thumping up the stairs from the livery barn office.

Blaine Farnum came in, panting with exertion, and waving a small yellow slip of paper.

"This is the day we been waiting for, Jet!" Farnum exclaimed. "Otie Leedom has cashed in old Crow's ch—" The bartender broke off, as he caught sight of Monte Spaulding's inert figure lying face down on the rumpled bed.

"He's dead to the world," grunted Jet Karnes. "Spaulding's dead, huh?"

Jet Karnes took the Overland telegraph

slip from the saloon boss and scanned it swiftly:

Notify Monte Spaulding his father died today.

Leedom

Karnes looked up to see Blaine Farnum grinning at him, his face almost satanic in the guttering lamplight.

"And now it's Monte's turn," Farnum's voice shook with excitement. "You all set to go through with it, Jet?"

The cold cigarette drooped from Karnes' lips as he held out his splayed fingers, betraying not the sign of a tremor.

"Why not?" he asked grimly. "For weeks I been readin' Monte's mail, so I know who his friends are. Nobody in Arizona ever laid eyes on me. I look enough like Monte to pass for his twin brother anywhere."

Farnum laughed softly.

"Enough like him to *be* him, from here on out!" he chuckled. "How does it feel to be the owner of the biggest cow spread in Arizona, Jet? Because that black-sheep's bequest is as good as yourn, right this minute."

They had a couple of drinks and then Jet Karnes got busy. From a wall peg he took down a pair of saddle bags, packing them with belongings. Then he rolled up his blankets and lashed them inside a saddle slicker. He'd head for Arizona tonight . . .

"I'll send that lawyer a wire in Monte's name," Farnum said thoughtfully. "And I'll write my friend Leedom that you'll be showing up inside of a month at the Circle S."

Karnes leaned over the lamp chimney to light his cigarette.

"This Leedom—is he a man to ride the river with?" he asked.

Farnum grinned down at Monte Spaulding's snoring form.

"Otie covered his tracks, don't worry. All you got to do is follow his instructions, deed over the Circle S to Leedom and high-tail back here when the time comes. We'll live like lords on our cut, Jet. And without any risk, thanks to you looking more like a Spaulding than a Karnes."

Karnes went downstairs and dismissed Injun Joe, the hostler, for the night. Then he saddled up his palomino and the crow-

bait sorrel which belonged to Blaine Farnum.

Night had fallen by the time the two conspirators had carried Monte Spaulding's limp form down into the barn and hoisted him on Farnum's sorrel. The bartender mounted behind him to support the black sheep buckaroo in saddle.

No one in Deadwood saw the riders head out from the rear of the Black Hills livery stable, climb Mount Moriah hill and head off into the uplands north of the mining camp.

Five miles up the Belle Fourche road they cut into the rough country, on a seldom-traveled trail which led to the abandoned Dinosaur Mine diggings. When they came in sight of the deserted shafthouse on the ridge they dismounted and hauled the limp form of Monte Spaulding out of stirrups.

The cold night air had revived the drunken heir to the Circle S sufficiently for him to stand on his own legs, but his stupefied brain appeared incapable of realizing where he was or how he had got there.

"Well, you carry on from here, Jet," whispered Farnum, swinging back astride and reaching down to shake Karnes' hand in the darkness. "I'll spread the word that you've gone to Montana to buy grain and hay. I doubt if anybody in Deadwood even notices that Monte ain't working at your place anymore."

Blaine Farnum sat his saddle, watching Jet Karnes support his drunken cousin's staggering weight on the short walk up to the shafthouse which loomed sharp-etched against the Dakota stars. Then he reined around and spurred back toward Deadwood, his mind busy with many things. Tonight's work culminated a plot of long and careful planning . . .

Where the trail curved over the hog-back, Farnum twisted in saddle for a last look at the Dinosaur. Against a tardy rising moon he saw the lone horseman who spurred away from the shafthouse to vanish below the skyline. It was all over—all over for Monte Spaulding.

Farnum chuckled. His conscience was easy. It wasn't like cold-blooded murder, anyway. Monte Spaulding had been too drunk to even experience terror in the brief seconds of that hurtling plunge into the Dinosaur's two-hundred foot shaft . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Out of the Past

ON A SUN-DRENCHED morning two months later a slim rider with the stamp of the north country on him reined in his dusty palomino in front of an adobe building in Trigo, Arizona.

He wore the wool chaps and checkered mountain shirt of the Dakota country, and the palomino's brand was strange to the border ranges.

The rider hipped over in saddle and relaxed a few minutes, his piercing blue eyes studying the sign which hung over the door of the adobe, gold letters against a black sanded background:

CARVER & CARVER
Attorneys-at-Law

Then, as if summoning up courage, the rider sucked in a deep breath and swung out of stirrups, hitching the palomino at the chewed hitchrack flanking the board walk.

His face bore the fatigue-lines of a trail that had led him from afar off. Dust had settled on the sweeping brim of his *El Stroud* sombrero, on the butts of the Colt .45's holstered low against his angora-chapped legs. His kangaroo cowboots bore the stitched Indian-head design which was currently popular in the northern ranges, confirming the fact that he was alien to the cactus country.

Heads had turned to follow the rider down the main street, as loafers along the awninged porches tried to decide if they had ever seen this powerfully built stranger before. There was something vaguely familiar about the wedge-shaped torso, the clean-shaven, outthrust jaw, the ice-blue eyes which looked neither right nor left as he rode between the false fronts.

The stranger's jingle-bobbed spurs chimed musically as he crossed the warped plank sidewalk and paused, his hand on the doorknob of the law office.

Then, as if coming to a decision, the rider flicked his quirly stub into the gutter and rapped on the door.

A girl's voice told him to come in. The stranger removed his Stetson as he opened the door, revealing a thick head of jet-black hair, touched with gray at the temples.

For a moment the cowboy stood framed

in the doorway, his head canted to miss the six-foot lintel. His narrowed gaze lingered briefly on the girl who sat at a desk on the opposite side of a hardwood railing, lifting as a door opened to reveal Vance Carver.

"My name's Montgomery Spaulding."

Rona Carver jumped to her feet and came around in front of the railing, her amber eyes searching the cowboy's face, their depths crowded with long-pent emotions. He returned her stare without changing expression.

"Monte—don't you—don't you even recognize me?"

A startled look flashed briefly across his face of the man who called himself Monte Spaulding.

At twenty-seven, Rona Carver's supple body was as slimly rounded as a girl in her teens. A wealth of honey-blonde hair cascaded to her shoulders, framing a face that was richly tanned, complementing the brown lustre of her eyes. She wore a white blouse and pleated skirt like an office clerk, but the signboard outside testified to her being a full-fledged attorney just like her father.

"Uh—of course, ma'am—Rona," he said lamely. "Reckon you've changed a mite since we was kids together. How are you?"

The girl started to speak, then bit her lip. It was old Vance's sonorous voice that eased the strain of the moment, as the old lawyer came forward with a hand outstretched in welcome.

"Rona isn't the only one who has changed a lot in eleven years, Monte," Carver said cordially, gripping the cowboy's hand. "You hardly look like the same boy who left Arizona. You're so—well, frankly, we were led to believe you—"

"Looked like a drunken bum?" the waddy cut in. "I used to hit the bottle quite a bit when I was younger. I've quit that."

Rona flushed. "I only wish your father could see you now, Monte," she said impulsively. "You—he'd be so proud—"

A faint suggestion of a frown crossed the waddy's face. He stood awkwardly, twisting the wide-brimmed Stetson in his hands.

"I wouldn't be here now if Craw—if my Dad was alive," he reminded them curtly. "I got your telegram, Mr. Carver. Took me this long to ride down from the Dakota country. I'd have taken a train, only I—I

sort of wanted to have time to think things out."

Vance Carver laughed in the hearty, bluff manner he had used in a hundred courtroom trials to set a witness at ease.

"Of course, of course, Monte!" he said. "But come on in. You'll want to hear your father's last will and testament."

The cowboy nodded bleakly.

"That's what I'm here for," he said bluntly. "Figgered I'd drop by and get the legal details thrashed out before I went out to the—the home ranch."

CARVER opened the door of his private office and stood aside as Monte Spaulding walked in, his spike-heeled Coffeyvilles thudding a staccato tread across the boards. Behind his back the lawyer and his daughter exchanged glances, faintly puzzled.

The cowboy from Dakota accepted the chair Carver offered him, while Rona went to a safe and drew out a metal filing box which she placed on her father's desk. The girl seated herself to one side, her troubled gaze studying Spaulding's expressionless face when the cowboy wasn't looking.

"Who killed Dad?" the puncher demanded suddenly.

Vance Carver busied himself unlocking the file box, his eyes avoiding the cowboy's intent stare.

"The sheriff hasn't a single clue," the lawyer said softly. "I'm afraid a man in your father's position has any enemies, Monte."

The cowboy nodded, staring at the floor. "Where did it happen? Your telegram gave no details."

"In Mescal Canyon, Monte!" Rona spoke up.

Spaulding turned, meeting the girl's eyes for an instant.

"Mescal Canyon?" he echoed blankly.

"Yes. You know—where we caught the baby fawn that time—in my tomboy days. Remember how you—"

The cowboy lifted his hand.

"I'd be obliged, ma'am, if we didn't talk about things—that happened before," he said evasively. "My memory ain't so clear about things that happened in those days. I've sort of tried to forget all that, you might say."

Rona Carver's hands twisted the handkerchief in her lap.

"Of course, Monte," she murmured. "I think I understand."

Vance Carver put on his steel-rimmed spectacles and fanned out the sheaf of legal papers from the Circle S dossier.

"I, Crawford Lee Spaulding, being of sound mind—"

For the next thirty minutes Carver read uninterruptedly through the maze of legal terminology in which he had couched Craw Spaulding's last will and testament. Throughout the reading, Rona Carver saw that the cowboy kept his eyes closed, his chin slumped on his chest.

"To sum it up," the lawyer concluded, laying the papers aside and removing his nose glasses, "your father had sufficient faith in your integrity and character to bequeath his entire estate to you, Monte. The Circle S, mining stocks, everything. You are worth in the neighborhood of three quarters of a million dollars, my son. It is a mighty challenge and a great responsibility. I am sure you will justify your father's great faith in you."

The cowboy got to his feet, swinging his sombrero across his angora chapleg.

"The way it stacks up," he said with a strange huskiness in his voice, "the Circle S is mine to do with as I see fit?"

"That is correct, son." Vance Carver met his daughter's eye, saw the same deep anxiety there which he himself was trying to mask from the Circle S heir. "The bequest carries no reservations of any sort whatsoever. That was Craw's inflexible wish."

"Then I can sell out the ranch lock, stock and barrel—if I want to?" the cowboy demanded sharply.

The lawyer cleared his throat.

"Of course. But I hope you don't contemplate such a radical move, Monte. I hardly believe your father would want the cattle empire he built up to slip into other hands after his death."

The waddy's eyes flashed impatiently.

"I just wanted to make sure if I had any strings tied to me," he said in clipped tones. "Now I reckon I'll be heading for the home spread and look it over."

The Carvers accompanied Monte Spaulding to the hitchrack.

"As your father's attorney, I am ready and willing to be of any assistance I can," old Vance said hesitantly. "You will find

the Circle S being run by Otis Leedom, your father's foreman."

Spaulding paused in the act of adjusting the chin thong of his sombrero.

"This Leedom," he said. "Is he a man to ride the river with?"

Carver looked flustered.

"But you know Otis Leedom—surely you remember him!" the lawyer exclaimed. "He was wrangling horses at the Circle S shortly before you and Craw had your—differences."

Spaulding colored, as if regretting a slip of the tongue.

"I remember Leedom, sure," he said vaguely. "But you know him better than I do. Is he trustworthy?"

For a long moment the men locked glances.

"I hardly know how to answer that one, son," Carver admitted. "I—I've heard it said Leedom has an owlhoot record."

The Dakota puncher turned on his heel and ducked under the hitchbar to mount his trail-weary palomino.

He reined around, then paused to touch his sombrero.

"Nice seeing you again, Miss Rona," he said, as if by way of afterthought. "*Hasta la vista.*"

Father and daughter stood staring after the cowboy as he touched the palomino's flanks with blunt rowels and headed off down Pedregosa Valley at a long lope. Then they turned and walked slowly back into the law office.

"I never saw a man seem so—so changed, Rona," the old man said, putting an arm around his daughter's shoulder. "The way he called you 'Miss Rona' just now . . . after all you two meant to each other in your school days. I must be getting senile, Rona, but I'd almost say that Monte doesn't ring true. There's something intangible about him—something different—"

Rona Carver slumped into her chair and buried her face in her hands.

"I've been thinking the same thing, Dad," she whispered brokenly. "It's almost—it's almost as if that cowboy isn't Monte Spaulding at all—but an entirely different person!"

INDIGO shadows were pooling between the stony ridges which hemmed in the Circle S home range when Jet Karnes'

palomino halted in front of the Spaulding ranch house.

A moon-faced Chinese hobbled from the building, his long queue whipping around his shoulder as he bowed excitedly.

"Mistlee Monte!" the oriental sing-songed. "Velly happee to see you back, Mistlee Monte!"

The cowboy frowned uncertainly, swinging out of stirrups and handing the Chinaman his reins.

"Glad to be back," he said. "You'll be . . . ?"

"Aw Gwan, You lember Aw Gwan? All samee cook who bake you pies when you little tike?"

Before Spaulding could answer, a tall figure in chaps and a Mexican hat emerged from the main doorway.

"Get Monte's hoss out to the barn, you yeller heathen!" ordered the newcomer sharply. "Groom him till he shines and double-grain him, you understand?"

The cowboy waited until Aw Gwan had vanished around the corner with the palomino. Then he turned to the Circle S man and shook hands.

"Been expecting you, Karnes. I'm Otis Leedom," the foreman introduced himself. "Be damned if you ain't the spittin' image of young Spaulding, same as that picture Monte sent his old man three years ago. Farnum's letters didn't do you justice, Karnes."

Angry lights flickered in the cowboy's blue eyes.

"My name is Monte Spaulding as long as I'm here," he snapped. "Don't let me hear you call me 'Karnes' again, Leedom!"

The Circle S foreman grunted apologetically.

"My mistake, Spaulding. I won't let it happen again. How'd you leave Farnum? Him and me used to hop the Border with 'dobe dollars before the Texas Rangers split up our wild bunch and Farnum headed into the Dakotas to hole up. Come on in."

Closeted inside the room which had served Craw Spaulding as a private office in years past, Otis Leedom got out glasses and a bottle and poured his guest a long drink.

The waddy who went by the name of Monte Spaulding stretched his lean length on a buffalo-robed divan in front of the fireplace and sipped the drink slowly, let-

ting it cut the dust of a long trail out of his throat.

"Farnum didn't tell me much in his letter, naturally," Otie Leedom said, hauling up a cane-bottomed chair and seating himself at the opposite end of the hearth. "Enough to tell me that your cousin won't rise out of the grave to haunt us."

The cowpuncher from Deadwood gulped a stiff swallow as if to rid himself of an unpleasant memory.

"Monte Spaulding," he remarked thoughtfully, "has probably the deepest grave in the Black Hills . . . I dropped by Carver's office on my way through Trigo this morning, Leedom. He read me Spaulding's will. And I saw the girl."

Leedom gave an obscene wink.

"Rona Carver's the belle of Concha County," he admitted. "And she's the weak link in our scheme, Karnes. I mean, Monte. You see, her and the kid was in love before the old man gave Monte the back of his hand. You got to steer clear of that filly. She'd see through your game where nobody else in Concha County would catch on."

Spaulding drew in a deep breath, his eyes lost in thought as he stared into the dancing flames.

"Carver told me I had a free hand to settle the affairs of the Circle S," he said casually. "So far, so good. I reckon the details are up to you, Leedom, like Farnum told me."

Otie Leedom lit up one of Craw's imported perfectos and settled back, grinning expansively.

"We can't miss. I've already started cutting men out of Craw's herd that we can't trust. By the time we're ready to swing the deal, the Circle S will be run by my own picked crew."

Monte Spaulding's face was inscrutable in the firelight.

"What gave you the idea in the first place?" he asked curiously. "Farnum? He always plays for high stakes—when he holds all the aces."

LEEDOM stood up, reached to the mantle and took down a framed picture. It depicted Jet Karnes and Monte Spaulding, standing in front of Wild Bill Hickok's grave overlooking Deadwood. Taken more than three years before, Monte Spaulding had mailed the photograph to his father in

a drunken whim which he hadn't even remembered the next day.

The photograph revealed the startling similarity between the first cousins. But whiskey and hard living had given Monte Spaulding the beginnings of a paunch, whereas Jet Karnes was built on the whippy lines that Monte had once possessed.

"This here picture give me the idea, two years ago," Leedom explained proudly. "I knew Old Craw aimed to will the outfit to Monte. So I wrote to my old partner Blaine Farnum and between us we whipped out the details. Say Old Craw kicks the bucket, and something happens to Monte. You show up and claim to be the missin' heir. The whole scheme depended on whether or not you were the stripe to act out the part. When Farnum tipped me off you were ready, Craw Spaulding met with an accident. And that's all there was to it."

The Deadwood cowboy joined in Leedom's laughter.

"Who wouldn't string along with a stacked deck like that?" he asked. "Especially seeing as how it would make me the richest cattleman in the Territory."

Leedom puffed a string of smoke rings.

"We'll play it close to the belly for a few weeks," the Circle S foreman went on. "Then you'll deed the outfit over to me and light out for Deadwood. We won't let Vance Carver handle the transfer of title. He's a cagey old son."

Monte Spaulding studied Leedom through slitted lids.

"The idea being," he prompted, "that you cut Farnum and me in on the profits of the outfit?"

Leedom started, something in the cowboy's tone causing him to pause with a whiskey glass half raised to his lips.

"Naturally," he said. "It's share an' share alike. Didn't Farnum explain the deal?"

Spaulding swung his long legs off the divan, hitching himself closer to the fire so that the glinting flames caught highlights on the cartridges studding his gun belts.

"What's to prevent me from deciding I like being a big-shot cattleman?" he asked suddenly. "Supposin' I didn't hanker to cut you and Farnum in on the deal?"

Leedom gave a hollow-sounding laugh.

"You wouldn't dare pull a double cross," he said, "and I'll tell you why. You couldn't get away with this masquerade more'n a few weeks at the outside, before Rona Carver or a hundred other people in Concha County got wise to the fact that you're an imposter. The ranch has got to be in my name, and you got to clear out of Arizona."

The Dakotan pursued his train of thought.

"Supposin'," he mused, "I thought I *could* get away with posing as my cousin? You couldn't give me away without exposin' your own hand in the deal. And the same goes for Farnum."

Leedom set his drink aside and leaned forward, murderous lights kindling in his pale green eyes.

"You wouldn't have the guts to go through with it if you could, Karnes!" snapped the foreman. "Because you know you'd get the same medicine I give Old Craw. A slug in the back and a grave nobody but the coyotes would know about."

For a long minute the two faced each other in steely eyed silence. Then the waddy from Deadwood laughed softly.

"You spook easy, don't you, Leedom?" he chided. "Pour me another drink."

CHAPTER THREE

Visitor From Deadwood

THE happy-go-lucky fiesta air which had pervaded the Circle S in the days of old Craw Spaulding's regime gave way to an atmosphere of strain, of hidden undercurrents of tension between riders who had shared the same bunkhouse with a big happy family spirit in the old days.

Bickering and petty feuds over unimportant matters had begun to make themselves manifest almost before the old cattle king's funeral was over. Invariably the agitation stemmed from the new riders hired by Otie Leedom in recent months.

The coming of Monte Spaulding to the Circle S brought things to a head. Old-line punchers who had worked on round ups and beef drives for Old Craw, suffering without complaint the hardships of sandstorm and blizzard and rustler raids from below the border, now found themselves getting a belly full of Otie Leedom's domineering and unreasonable ways.

The punchers sought audiences with the

new boss of the Circle S, only to be put aside with the curt reminder that Otie Leedom was running the outfit and that the *segundo's* word was law.

Two distinct factions took shape—the old Spaulding outfit and the new riders, gun-toting hardcases for the most part, whom Otie Leedom began importing to the spread.

Restrained by a savage loyalty to their murdered boss, Old Craw's buckaroos curbed their rebellious instincts and took their troubles to Vance Carver down in Trigo.

The veteran lawyer advised them to stick to the Circle S until after the fall beef gather, in the hope that young Monte Spaulding would throw off the yoke of Otie Leedom and take a more active hand in controlling the destinies of the vast cattle kingdom he had inherited.

Monte Spaulding, however, was an elusive, almost mysterious figure around the ranch. Vance Carver visited the Circle S on repeated occasions, only to be informed by Aw Gwan, the Chinese cook, that Mistle Spaulding was absent from the ranch on a tour of the line camps back in the hills.

On the morning marking his third week at the ranch, the rider from Deadwood came out to breakfast to find a legal document beside his plate. It was an instrument deeding over the Circle S and subsidiary interests to Otis Leedom and Blaine Farnum, the latter represented as being a financier and mining magnate from Deadwood, South Dakota, who was paying a cash sum for the Spaulding holdings.

"I had a lawyer over in Phoenix draw this up legal," Otie Leedom explained, grinning at Spaulding over the rim of his coffee cup. "All it takes is your signature, son, and you can rattle your hocks back to Deadwood and wait for the money to roll in."

Spaulding's eyes drew together in a frown as he waded through the ponderous legal phrases.

"This makes you and Farnum partners in the Circle S," he pointed out. "Where do I come in? I run all the risk if your trick leaks out."

Leedom spread his hands in a placating gesture.

"Naturally we couldn't put your real name down as a partner, Karnes," he said. "You bein' a cousin of the Spauldings, that

wouldn't look so good. Vance Carver would get suspicious if he thought I bought you out, knowing I had been working for sixty a month and found for the past twenty years. But by making it appear that Blaine Farnum is a millionaire miner, the deal won't arouse nobody's suspicions."

Spaulding pushed the paper back across the table.

"The time ain't ripe for this," he said doggedly. "I got a few things to attend to before I leave the ranch."

Leedom's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Such as what?" he prompted.

Spaulding shrugged. "This feudin' between Old Crow's hands and these gunnies you've hired, for one thing. They still outnumber us two to one. Things is nearing a boiling point, Leedom. There'll be bloodshed between the two camps if something ain't done about it, and pronto."

Leedom rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. He had lost his half-roused fears of Jet Karnes' visiting Trigo and putting his false identity to the test before friends of the real Monte Spaulding. But as Old Crow's heir, the puncher could still be useful.

"Here's what I want to do," Spaulding went on. "You call together all of Crow's old riders, from Aw Gwan down to the oldest bronc wrangler on the spread. As owner of the Circle S, I got the right to hire and fire. I'll talk with 'em private, tell 'em the raw deal Old Crow give me, and that I aim to root out all of the Spaulding set-up, complete."

Leedom pondered the suggestion and found it good. Open warfare between the dissenting groups in the Circle S bunkhouse would lead inevitably to gunplay, and that would bring Sheriff Jess Grewman into the picture. A brush with the law at this stage of the game could be fatal. Whispers were already beginning to circulate down in Trigo that something was fishy up at the Circle S, with Monte Spaulding refusing to show his face to visitors. . . .

"It's a deal," Leedom agreed. "I'll round up the old hands after dinner and you can give it to 'em straight, Karnes. That'll still give me time to get my crew built up before the fall beef round-up."

THE mass meeting of Old Crow Spaulding's waddies was held at noon, down under the cottonwoods by the original

homestead shack which Old Crow had built after he quit the Rangers. The shack was a good quarter mile from the main ranch buildings, and Monte Spaulding, mounted on his Dakota palomino, rode down from the headquarters house alone.

Leedom and his collection of paid gunhawks remained behind to watch the proceedings from a distance. For ten minutes, they saw the waddy from Deadwood arguing with the sullen-faced Spaulding crew, speaking from horseback and with his hands never straying far from his guns.

When Spaulding returned to the ranch house, Leedom and his gunhawk crew dispersed, sixguns ready for trouble if it broke.

Whatever Spaulding had said to the old-line Circle S rannies, it accomplished results. A few minutes later a line of angry-eyed punchers were filing past a table Spaulding had set up on the porch of the rambling California-style ranch house, to collect their pay in full from Old Crow's private safe.

Leedom watched from behind curtained windows in the living room as Crow's riders took their last pay in angry silence and began drifting over to the bunkhouse to pack their warsacks and cut their private saddle stock from the remuda corral.

Aw Gwan, the ancient Chinese cook, was the last to draw his time. Tears were streaming down the oriental's fat cheeks as Monte Spaulding shut his paybook and got to his feet, the job finished. The last trace of Old Crow's influence on the Circle S had been uprooted in one sweeping stroke.

"I stay—I cook, all samee as before—no get paid!" Aw Gwan begged piteously, clutching at Spaulding's sleeve as the cowboy headed for the door. "I glow up with C'le S, Mistlee Monte. Old Aw Gwan got no places to go. Me stay all samee as before?"

With an impatient oath, the waddy from Deadwood struck the aged celestial across the face with the back of the heavy, cloth-bound ledger.

"You get your yellow carcass off Circle S dirt or I'll nail your hide to a fence!" he yelled angrily. "Git, understand?"

Sobbing audibly, Aw Gwan reeled off toward the bunkhouse, threads of blood leaking from a bruised nose.

"You must have dished up some power-

ful bad medicine during that pow-wow, Karnes!" chuckled Leedom, when Spaulding joined him inside. "I figgered we might have a gun ruckus on our hands, but they're pullin' out meek as milk!"

The departure of the Circle S punchers left the ranch short-handed, and Leedom scattered his picked men to various tasks.

Spaulding headed for the corral with his palomino, then mounted and headed off toward Mescal Canyon, ostensibly on one of his rides to keep shy of visitors to the home ranch.

This time, however, the cowboy took the cut-off trail to Pedragosa Valley, topping the rise in time to see the smudge of dust where Craw Spaulding's crew was making its sorrowful exodus toward the cowtown.

By midafternoon he had reached Trigo, entering town by a back street. He dismounted in front of Carver's law office.

The white-headed old attorney met him at the door just as Craw Spaulding's riders were hitting the fringe of town. It was the first time they had met face to face since the puncher's arrival from Deadwood three weeks before.

"I got to have a little visit with Rona, Mister Carver," the rider drawled. "Maybe the last talk I'll be having with her, so I hope she's in."

Vance Carver met the rider's stare with something like panic crossing his face.

"But Rona got your message this morning," the lawyer said. "She's gone out to the ranch—against my better judgment, I might add. You've been acting very strangely, Monte. Surely you need my help in arranging your father's affairs."

Carver broke off as he saw the look on the cowboy's face.

"Message?" he echoed. "I didn't..."

Vance Carver clutched at the door sill for support, a pulse hammering on his scrawny neck.

"One of Leedom's new roustabouts dropped by the office at dinner time," Carver said huskily. "He said you were too busy to get to town, but that you wanted to see Rona. She saddled up and headed for the Circle S around one o'clock."

Knots of muscle played on the corners of the Dakotan's jaws. Then he whirled, vaulted into saddle and sent his palomino rocketing back down the side street, thereby missing the cavalcade of Circle S riders who were approaching from the west.

... Night was spreading across the Arizona foothills when the Deadwood man reined up his lathered mount in front of the Circle S ranch house. He ground-tied the winded palomino and ran up the porch steps, loosing his six-guns in holsters.

He slammed open the front door to see Otie Leedom standing with his back to the fireplace. The only light in the big Circle S living room came from the red glow of the hearth. "What's this about the girl getting a message to come out here, Leedom?" he demanded harshly.

The Circle S foreman hooked thumbs in shell belts, leaning back to rub his shoulders against the big mantlepiece.

"Lots of visitors come out to the Circle S," Leedom drawled, a hint of menace in his voice. "Like for instance our old friend from Deadwood, who pulled in just ahead of you."

For the first time, Spaulding became aware of the presence of a lanky hombre seated back in the shadows. Leedom moved aside and the glare of the firelight fell on the rawboned features of the Deadwood bartender, Blaine Farnum.

"You sized it up right, Leedom," Farnum said grimly. "This ain't Jet Karnes. *He's the real Monte Spaulding!*"

CHAPTER FOUR

Hot Lead Payoff

THE MASQUERADE was over. This was showdown.

Like a wolf at bay, Monte Spaulding swung into a crouch, hands streaking to gun butts. Then he froze, as a glint of firelight on drawn steel drew his eye back to Otie Leedom.

The Circle S foreman had timed his draw to take advantage of Blaine Farnum's amazing revelation. The big-bored Colts were trained on Spaulding's chest.

For an instant the Circle S heir debated his chances of beating the cold drop. Leedom might be bluffing, as long as the deed wasn't signed. Then, remembering that Rona Carver must figure in Leedom's showdown, the cowboy relaxed.

"You rake in this pot, Leedom," Spaulding conceded, raising his arms. "What do you aim to do about it?"

Blaine Farnum stalked across the room, a six-gun jutting from his fist. Farnum

sidled around behind Monte Spaulding and gingerly removed the Colts from the puncher's holsters.

"It was Jet Karnes you pitched into that mine shaft the night we drug you out of Deadwood, wasn't it?" snarled the bartender. "You wasn't drunk. You must have heard all we said when I brought Leedom's telegram over to the barn for Jet to read. Was that how it was?"

Monte Spaulding's lips curled in a bleak grin.

"The deal you two were cooking up was enough to jolt a wooden Indian cold sober," the son of Craw Spaulding admitted. "What little manhood I had left, I managed to salvage during that ride up to the Dinosaur Mine. After I took care of Jet Karnes I decided to carry through your little play until I'd avenged my Dad's murder."

Otie Leedom holstered one of his guns and came forward, his thumb alert on the knurled hammer of his remaining .45.

"You inherited your Dad's guts," he admitted grimly. "It took nerve to impersonate yourself that way. But we're ready to call your last bet, Spaulding. That deed is waiting for your Jawn Henry."

Monte Spaulding lowered his arms slowly, aware of the pressure of Blaine Farnum's gun muzzle in his back.

"And then you would cash in my chips with a slug, eh?" he retorted. "I'll sign nothing, Leedom. I visited Vance Carver this afternoon. Even if you forge my signature on that deed, it won't hold in court. Carver will see to that."

Spaulding was bluffing, but Leedom seemed unaffected.

"I taken care of that little angle too, Spaulding, when I sent my man to town this afternoon to meet Farnum's train!" the Circle S foreman said. "I got sense enough to know we couldn't torture you into signing that paper. That's where your girl figgers in the deal."

As he spoke, Otie Leedom stepped over to the door of Old Craw's private office. He unlocked it and flung it open, a flood of lamplight streaming into the room.

Blinking against the glare, Monte Spaulding caught sight of Rona Carver seated at his father's desk. Her feet were trussed to the chair legs with lass'-rope and her wrists were tied securely with pigging strings.

The defiance faded from Monte Spaulding's eyes. Leedom had baited his trap with the girl who had proved her fidelity and devotion during Monte Spaulding's wild and prodigal years . . .

Moving like a man in a nightmare, Monte Spaulding crossed the room and paused at the threshold of Old Craw's office.

He saw the love of a staunch woman's heart mirrored in Rona Carver's eyes, answered by the remorse and despair in his own.

"I come to town to—tell you everything, this afternoon, Rona," he said hoarsely. "It looks like I waited just one day too long."

The girl stared past him at the gunmen waiting at his back.

"Don't sign anything, Monte," Rona Carver said. "They would only kill us anyway . . . I'm mighty proud of you, Monte Spaulding. . . ."

Gun muzzles prodded Spaulding into the room where Leedom had outlined the ramifications of his plot, three short weeks before. He slumped down in a chair beside a table on which Leedom had laid out the Circle S deed, with pen and ink ready beside the papers.

It seemed to Spaulding in that moment that his father's presence pervaded the room, and in his despair he drew strength from Old Craw's vigorous and unflinching memory.

"We got your man hogtied for branding, Rona!" Leedom taunted. "The Circle S is the price he's got to pay for your life. And Monte knows it."

Farnum and Otie Leedom took their places on the buffalo-robed divan across the desk from Spaulding, their guns trained at him from two angles. A break would be suicidal.

"I've got to have more of a guarantee than that," Monte said desperately. "I won't sign anything until Rona's turned loose and given an hour's head start to town. Then you can have the Circle S and be damned."

Blaine Farnum caught a gesture from the foreman. He crossed around behind the divan and stooped over the fireplace, to draw a poker from the blazing hot coals there.

A wisp of smoke spiraled up as the

bartender blew on the red-hot end of the iron rod.

"They say a Spaulding can stand a lot pain," Farnum said. "But I ain't so sure the girl is cut out of the same leather, son. Think it ov—"

FROM out of the night, outside the ranch house and down toward the Circle S bunkhouse, there came a sudden sporadic crash of gunfire, followed by a drumroll of hoofs and a bedlam of yells.

With a sharp oath, Farnum leaped to the window and ran up the shade.

"Riders have jumped your men down at the bunkshack!" gasped the Deadwood saloonman, spinning to face Leedom. "They're circlin' and shootin' like Apache Injuns!"

Monte Spaulding laughed harshly at their consternation.

"That'll be Vance Carver and my father's buckaroos, followin' me out from Trigo," the puncher's voice sounded above the roar of gunshots and hoofbeats outside. "That little speech I made to the men this afternoon was when I tipped my cards to the riders you couldn't buffalo, Leedom. They aimed to circle back after dark and do some much-needed housecleaning around the Circle S."

Rona Carver moved with the rapidity of a striking snake in that instant. Leaning forward in her chair, the girl swept her trussed arms across the desk, smashing the oil lamp to the floor to engulf the room in blackness.

Timed with the crash of breaking glass, Monte Spaulding upended the table against Otie Leedom. The foreman somersaulted backwards over his chair, his six-gun blasting splinters from the heavy table.

Pouncing in from the side, Monte Spaulding sent a fist smashing against the foreman's jaw, felt bone crack under the terrific haymaker. It had taken a twelve-hundred-mile horseback ride from Dakota to restore the old-time power to his muscles—

An instant later Spaulding was jerking the Colt .45 from Leedom's fist. He swung to meet the threat of Blaine Farnum's guns, over by the window.

From a crouch, Spaulding tripped gunhammer. Farnum spun under the impact

of a slug drilling his forehead. Blood spurted and the bartender went down for keeps.

Otie Leedom was rearing to his feet, blood seeping from his fractured jaw. He shook his head dazedly and dug his other gun from leather.

Limned against the fireplace glow, Rona Carver saw the two men shoot it out at point blank range, saw flame spit from the deadly up-swinging muzzles of recoiling guns.

Leedom's hasty shot crashed into the floor between Spaulding's feet, even as the cowboy's bullet smashed Leedom in the elbow.

The foreman's knees buckled. He transferred his gun to his other hand, bawling profane defiance as he clawed the overturned table for support.

With cold precision, Monte Spaulding drove three more slugs into his father's bushwhacker, pulling trigger until the firing pin snapped with a click on an exploded cartridge.

Stepping over Otie Leedom's bullet-butchered corpse, Monte Spaulding groped through milky layers of gunsmoke to slash Rona Carver's bonds and lift the girl into his arms.

Outside the shooting had died away, and they heard Aw Gwan's triumphant yells announcing the end of owlhoot rule on the Circle S. . . .

Vance Carver and Aw Gwan, both carrying rifles, stormed into the Circle S living room a few minutes later.

Leedom's gunhawks, decimated by the swift and ruthless attack on the bunkhouse, had surrendered to Old Crow's hands rather than hold out against the unexpected siege.

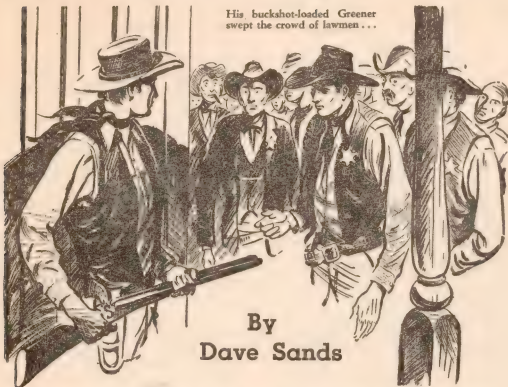
As Rona fled to her father's arms, Monte Spaulding turned to Aw Gwan.

"I didn't aim to bash you so hard this afternoon, old friend!" he apologized. "But it was sort of part of this damned owl-hoot game—"

The beaming Chinaman winked an oblique eye and jerked his head toward Rona Carver.

"Me got job in kitchen," he chuckled. "Me bake wedding cake, all samee as did for Mistlee Claw in old days when he get malled, huh?"

His Friend, the Killer



By
Dave Sands

Bat Masterson had never yet gone back on his word; but when the famous Dodge City star-toter had to choose between loyalty and his sworn lawman's oath—he decided that first things came first!

"IF THAT blasted Dodge City star-toter sticks his nose in this here saloon tonight," the drunken cowboy swore, "I'll gut-shoot him! He killed my bunky in Dodge last year when we laid over a coupla days with our trail herd. I aim to even the score."

It was in Martin Dunn's saloon in old Tascosa, a wild and woolly cowtown in the Texas Panhandle, that this boast was made. And the man threatened was no other than Bat Masterson, the famous Western town-tamer. Having drawn Dodge City's fangs, Masterson was now performing a similar job on old Tascosa. The Texas town needed taming. Bat Masterson was doing fine, and by the looks of things, would return before long to Dodge City.

Bat had made friends in Tascosa. He had also made enemies. Many a cowboy disliked having his pleasures hobbled and his fun put on a short picket rope. A flock of the disgruntled ones were this night assembled in Martin Dunn's place and the drunken boaster found plenty of encouragement.

It was nearing midnight when Bat Masterson walked in. As the light from the coal-oil lamps reflected from his star, a hush fell on the rowdy gathering. From Masterson, eyes turned to the drunken loud-mouth. It was a case of put up or shut up now. The braggart chose the former.

Jerking out his gun, he hollered: "I'll salivate that fancy clothes-hoss right now!"

It was his last mistake. He shouldn't have wasted time on words.

Bat Masterson's silver-plated gun came from its holster like greased lightning. Not bothering to aim, the master gunman fired from the hip. It was, as usual, a bull's eye. The drunk keeled over while his slug tore futile splinters from the door post.

But the fellow had friends. Hardware was being unlimbered everywhere now. Bullets came like hail. One piece of lead got Masterson in the leg. It snapped out from under him and he joined the dead man on the floor. The pack pounced furiously upon him.

It was at this moment that Ben Thompson, who ran a faro game in the saloon, leaped clear over his lay-out to land in front of the downed lawman. Sixgun in hand, Thompson faced the gang.

"Stand back!" he shouted. "I'll kill the first man that moves!"

Ben Thompson had a reputation—a gun-reputation. He and his brother Billy Thompson were rumored to sport twenty-seven notches on their guns. They were a couple of tough hombres. Ben was known as being utterly fearless and extraordinarily quick on the trigger. It was on account of such sudden triggering that he had been forced to leave Ogallala and Elsworth and seek momentary refuge in Tascosa.

This the cowboys knew. And now, with the formidable Ben facing them with his killing-iron unlimbered, they remembered the Thompson reputation. Their trigger fingers fell idle.

Ben Thompson eyed them grimly. "This man," he said, pointing at Bat, "is a friend of mine. He's under my protection, savvy?"

With that, Ben Thompson helped Bat up on his one good leg and hop-carried him to his room. There Ben took care of Bat till the lawman's leg was healed,

IT WAS about a year later that Ben Thompson came to see Bat Masterson in Dodge City, Bat having returned there.

"Bat," Thompson said, "I'm behind the eight ball—I need your help."

"Anything at all, Ben," Masterson told him, remembering that night in old Tascosa. "Anything in my power I'll gladly do for you."

"That's fine," Ben Thompson said. "Now I know everything'll turn out all right."

Bat experienced a sense of misgiving

then. It occurred to him that maybe he had promised a bit rashly. He thought, he should at the very least have left that "gladly" out of it. But a promise made was a debt unpaid in Bat Masterson's code, and he was no man to welch on any debt.

He shrugged. "Sure," he said.

"It's my brother Billy," Thompson explained. "He's done it again. They've got him locked up in Ogallala. He killed a man there in a poker game quarrel and got badly wounded himself. They've got him under guard now and are just waiting for him to get well enough so he can walk to the cottonwood where they aim to string him up. Now, I can't go to Ogallala myself, because I used to run a game there and everybody knows me. The minute I show up they'll figger I've come to rescue Billy and they'll hang him right off to make sure I won't. But they don't know you from Adam, 'way up there in Nebraska. So I would like for you to go to Ogallala and see what you can do for Billy."

As Bat listened to that long recitation, his face took on an even more sober look than usual. This was a chore he did not relish. Ben and Billy Thompson were notorious gunmen. Their trigger-contributions to Boothill were cause of much discussion. All these plantings hadn't come from the sunny side of the six-shooter. There was considerable shade involved, so it was said; and in a good many nostrils the brothers' reputation reeked to high heaven. Both flung lead at the slightest of provocations, and Billy was especially noted for a quarrelsome disposition, which was touchily aggravated when he was drunk; and drunk he was most of the time.

No, Bat Masterson didn't like the smell of this. Not a-tall! But he was under serious obligation to Ben, and Ben was exceedingly fond of Billy, his kid brother. Looking back, Bat Masterson could see *how* fond:

One time, when Billy Thompson had killed a soldier in Austin, Texas, Ben had gone to his rescue. Killing a man while effecting Billy's escape, Ben himself was caught. He languished in the stony lonesome for over two years before he managed to escape. Another time, Billy killed Sheriff Whitney in Elsworth, Kansas. That killing aroused the citizens of that hard-bitten trail-town to such a pitch that they

decided brother Billy needed stringing up. They came after him in a mob, but Ben Thompson, armed with the same shotgun with which Billy had dispatched the sheriff, held them off while friends helped Billy to a horse and sent him racing hell-for-leather out of town.

For over an hour Ben Thompson stood at bay, his back against the wall of the Grand Central Hotel, holding off Elsworth's enraged citizens with the buckshot-loaded Greener, refusing to surrender to peace officers Bim Hogue, Brocky Norton, Chuck Brown, Eddie Crawford, and Happy Jack Morco. Ben Thompson had not the slightest faith in the law-abiding notions of this star-toting quintet. And not without cause. Each of the five would have murdered him very cheerfully, and with the bunch of them it would have been an exceedingly enjoyable picnic.

It was not until Mayor Jim Miller arrived upon the scene that Ben Thompson became amenable to words. On the proposal that Miller disarm Happy Jack and send away the other officers—which Mayor Jim did—Ben Thompson gave up his shotgun and was committed to jail. He was later acquitted of complicity in the killing of the sheriff.

This then was the extent to which Ben Thompson was willing to go for his brother. And all this Bat Masterson knew. He was now faced with the dilemma of assisting a well-known killer in cheating the noose while he himself was a sworn upholder of the law, or renege of his promise and on his obligation.

It was not an easy choice. But Bat was loyal to the core, and first things came first with him. Besides, Ogallala was not Dodge City. And moreover, from what he understood, the Nebraskans were planning to string up Ben's brother without benefit of the law's processing. They had let out that they intended lynching Billy the minute he could stand up long enough under a cottonwood to have a loop fixed around his stubby neck.

This, of course, was an exceedingly thin excuse for intervention in Ogallala, but better thin than none. And excuse or no excuse, Bat Masterson's reputation was at stake.

"All right, Ben," he said, "I'll take a

pass out to Ogallala. I'll do what I can for Billy. I don't like it though; I don't like it at all."

IN OGALLALA, Bat registered at the same hotel where Billy was kept locked in a room with a guard at the door night and day. Masterson made no hurried moves, but took his time, strolling around town for several days, visiting saloons, and letting on that he was looking for a place to start a business.

At the hotel, he made it a point to get acquainted with Billy's guards. He played up to them and gained their friendship and trust. But each night after dark he would seek out friends of the Thompsons to plan with them for Billy's escape from the Ogallala hoosegow.

Between them, they concocted a feasible scheme. On the selected night, Bat Masterson presented Billy's guard with a quart of Old Crow wherewith to while away the tedious hours. It was a time-honored ruse, and it worked with the usual success.

Close to midnight, with the east-bound flyer due at Ogallala "the friends, smack on schedule, started shooting up a dance-hall in a most riotous manner. Hearing the fusilade, the half-soused guard rushed out to see if the sheriff maybe needed a bit of help. He wasn't out of the lobby, when Bat Masterson walked into Billy's room, wrapped a blanket around the wounded hellion, slung him over his shoulder, and toted him through back alleys and dark streets to the depot.

A few minutes later, Bat and Billy, ensconced in a Pullman, were bidding goodbye to Ogallala.

They got off at North Platte where Bat took Billy to the ranch of Buffalo Bill. What transpired between Bat and Buffalo Bill is not on record. Likely the daring scheme appealed to the adventuresome Buffalo Bill. Maybe he owed Bat allegiance for an old favor done. Maybe he did it just for the hell of it. *Quien sabe?* In any case, Buffalo Bill let Bat have a horse and buggy; and in that buggy Bat Masterson hauled Billy by easy stages across the Nebraska and Kansas prairies to his own balliwick, Dodge City.

And so Bat Masterson, lawman, paid off the debt of honor he owed Ben Thompson, outlaw.

By Harold F. Cruickshank

“OLD SCARS” made soft whimpering throat sounds—ludicrous sounds coming from one so huge. Not in all the Bitter Root country was there a grizzly as ponderous; nor one that had come through so many battles and vicissitudes, as the oldster now coming from his den.

Old Scars sniffed sharply at the opening and gave out sounds which seemed to come up from deep inside him as he caught the multitudinous scents of early spring.

He was hungry. His belly was empty, but under his hide there was still fat from last autumn's feedings.

Among the scents Old Scars picked up was the tang of his last summer's mate. She had had her cub in hibernation nearby, but she was no longer any concern of Old Scars. If they met again before the next mating season, or even then, it would be through

an accident, certainly not by any special design.

The big grizzly's nose quivered as he caught the smell of bighorn sheep, and had his sense of sight been good at all, he could have seen a small band of sheep grazing on a small green plateau below.

Then he rolled clear of his den zone and ambled down along his old trail to the marshland in the valley below.

He moved with the stealth of Acheeta, the cougar, as he headed for the flatland. The sheep winded him and leaped “upstairs” with the amazing speed which only their mountain neighbors, the goats, could possibly match.

They had nothing to fear from Old Scars yet. Though his stomach was shrunk



Old Scars enarled savagely—
there was a strangeness about
the kill . . .

WARRIOR-BOSS OF THE BITTER ROOTS

Old Scars, the battle-marked grizzly, had watched his mates die: one with a bullet ripping through her vitals, and the other with the retching agony of strychnine tearing at her shaggy soul. . . . But the warrior king of the Bitter Root Country lived on to exact his own kind of payment from his most hated enemies—in one last bloody, berserk battle!

and empty, he would eat no heavy food for some time—not until he had cleansed his intestinal tract with the medicinal purgatives of those roots he would dig up at the marshes.

Near the marsh flats, Old Scars came to a stop. He ran a loose-clawed hind paw along his side, near the shoulder, where almost-white hair testified to the mark of a hunter's bullet. There were other, similar white patches and scars on Old Scars' big hide—hence his name. They were the scars of antler, fang, tusk, and bullet. The scars made him easily identifiable by hunters, but in his eighteen years of chieftainship of the Bitter Root wild country, he had acquired a great wisdom and cunning. He dreaded the man scent and he avoided man. When bayed by dogs, he went swiftly, furiously into battle and slayed them. He was lord of the craglands . . .

As he dug vigorously for the medicinal roots, Old Scars paused now and then to circle the area, testing always for danger sign.

He stood and listened to the new sounds of spring. Near by, on a slough, whose water at the edges still showed ice signs, a pair of newly-arrived green-winged teal called . . . High overhead, a flight of Canada geese winged northward and in the willows, small songbirds twittered fussily like new tenants trying to do the work of a month in one day.

Old Scars chortled an expression of contentment . . . For a day or so he lived close to the marshes, plucking the first green shoots of grass and wild mint. Shortly, he would visit the ice-free creeks where the trout would be running.

Now he rose to his hind paws and sniffed with delight the tang of young calves in a not too distant pasture.

So long as his food of the wilds: rodents,

fish, wild fruit, was plentiful, Old Scars gave the range of the M-Bar-G ranch a wide berth, but on occasion, when a temporary wilderness famine pressed, the oldster would weave on down and cut the throat of a young heifer. Up in the elk country, when the antlers of Many and his kind were shed, or in the velvet, Old Scars would crack down a young cow elk, and sometimes a young deer.

Suddenly, he whirled on his squat form and with tremendous speed, utterly belying his great seven-hundred-pound hulk, he hurled himself to cover as a horse and rider crossed the westerly neck of the meadow.

Two rifle shots blasted. Old Scars, in his cover, froze. He smelled the acrid fumes of burnt powder, but no bullet had struck nearby.

CLOSE to sunset, as he came in around a butte on a shelf of rock above a canyon draw, Old Scars halted and rose to his full height. A soft whimpering sound escaped him as the scent of blood struck his nostrils sharply. With that scent was the tang of his former mate, Karek. She was lying, blowing hard, in the canyon bottom. Blood oozing steadily from a wound back of her shoulder.

Man had struck sharply.

In ordinary circumstances, there was no instinctive call on Old Scars to stand by this danger area. But today Karek was a creature of Old Scars' kind—a creature in distress.

He moaned as he swayed about her, his small eyes flashing, jaws champing with a mounting anger against the man creature.

Up in her cragland den lay a small cub and in Karek the instincts of motherhood were very strong. She struggled to raise her forequarters when Old Scars nudged her. It seemed as if she leaned against his

strong head for support, while she caught her breath and built up strength for the next attempt to rise.

More than once she dropped back to her side, exhausted . . . Old Scars left her for long moments while he walked about the area sniffing for man sign. Now the definite tang of the man scent reached him, and Old Scars chuffed his warnings to Karek. At last she struggled to her feet and reeled against the canyon wall blowing hard.

Old Scars ranged his big hulk against her wounded side and together they moved slowly off to a neighboring spring where Karek slumped down into the cool water and muck.

The bleeding stopped. Likewise, the cold water had temporarily eased the pain in Karek's throbbing udders. As time passed, occasionally she raised her head and sent out soft plaintive calls in the general direction of her den, but not for two more days was she able to travel back to her lair.

There, a shock awaited her, for blended with the sharp tang of man was the death scent of her cub. Man had made a kill, and old Karek's every nerve fibre quivered violently with a strange mingling of passionate anger and sense of loss.

She whirled about on Old Scars and raked the side of his head with her claws. Had she been in condition, and had not the big male been alert, she might have done serious damage. Growling savagely, Old Scars backed off. This was a time when the female of the wild folk species might exercise the prerogative of control of a situation.

TWICE as the spring season rushed through the brawling freshets to early summer, Old Scars came close to Karek at the fishing riffles.

Their paths again crossed later when Karek protested Old Scars' presence at her favorite berry patch, but today, the big male was in no mood to suffer her protestations meekly. Flies and ticks had harassed him. He peeled his lips back over his huge tusks and whirled, a forepaw raised threateningly. Karek snarled and flopped her wobbly form out of range, shifting off to a sector safe from the angry male. There she resumed her feasting on the wild fruit . . .

Hot summer suns dried up the headwater trout streams. The grass was brownish, forcing Old Scars up into the marmot

country, where he dug vigorously day after day, often with scant reward.

Now, boldly, he began a descent from the high places, setting his course for the valley below, his mood one of bitterness toward all living creatures. His intent was to find the greener grass in the meadows, but every now and then his nostrils were teased by the tang of young cattle stock, especially when Martin Grove, the ranch owner, butchered a steer or a hog.

Then came a night when the moon, at the half, flooded the valley with soft, creamy light.

Old Scars' belly gnawed and grumbled for food—big food. He picked up the scent of Karek, blended with that of the cattle. Old Scars growled deep in his throat and started off for the cattle pastures.

As he struck a patch of cottonwoods, the big silver tip halted sharply and rose to his full height, the better to sniff for danger signs.

The frenzied bawl of a cow startled him. He whirled and went loping toward a rail fence line. At a break in the fence he flopped over and shortly came up on Karek, snarling gutturally at a young cow which but a short hour ago had dropped her first calf. Karek, her wounded shoulder still weak, was in no condition to withstand the attack even of the small cow.

Suddenly her forelimb buckled. She went down. Bawling, the cow, sharp horns lowered, charged.

Old Scars rushed from a flank. As the cow cocked her head for a thrust of a single horn, she exposed her throat, and the big silver tip's jaws struck swiftly, savagely. Scarcely had Old Scars' tusks clamped on a throat hold when he heaved back his great bulk . . . The cow pitched to the ground with a broken neck, part of her windpipe in Old Scars' great tusks.

Old Scars rushed and again and again bit that wounded throat fiercely, until the cow kicked only feebly, then lay starkly still.

Karek came weaving in. Not for some time had she found food sufficient for her needs. Her big sloppy jaws slavered and frothed, but Old Scars came about swiftly and struck her sharply in the side of the head. This was his kill.

He turned now and seized the dead cow by the throat. Never was there a greater demonstration of grizzly power as when Old

Scars dragged his limp and heavy kill from the pasture. Karek trailed him, the tang of fresh blood exciting her savage desire, but the big male remained adamant.

His big sides blowing fiercely he moved slowly on, his prodigious strength never failing him, until at last, in a small clearing in an alder belt he relinquished his jaw hold. He would mound earth against the sides of his kill, returning a day or so later to feast on the ripening flesh. Now he turned and searched for sign of Karek, but she was back at the pasture. There was the young wobbly calf with its seductive tang of ready and easy flesh.

Karek struck swiftly, making a kill with ease. She drank warm blood a moment or so, then seizing the little carcass firmly in her jaws, she lifted him easily, save for a hind leg that trailed, and came out along Old Scars' trail.

All at once, Karek stopped, freezing in her tracks. From her back, from the home spread of the M-Bar-G, came the deep-throated baying of hunting dogs.

Old Scars, too, heard. He feared hounds only because they were part of man and his grim machinations. The sleek canines trailed the wild creatures endlessly, and unless their quarry turned suddenly and killed before the arrival of man, there was little hope in the end for the hunted wild one . . .

OLD SCARS swung away from his kill and circled his back trail, sniffing for sign of man scent . . . It came now, blended with that of the dog creatures.

Karek floundered on by, the calf kill still secure in her jaws.

Old Scars was wise. The stronger scent would be that of Karek following the blood trail of the dragged cow carcass. Old Scars shifted off right and began to back-track. The baying of the close-in hounds set every fibre of his body quivering. He could hear the drum of horse hoofs and the dread scent of man—sharp and menacing . . .

Mart Grove, owner of the M-Bar-G had lost too many head of stock to the tusks and fangs of Old Scars and Acheeta, the cougar, and their kind, to have any sentiment about the wild folk. He came out roaring mad on the trail of the nocturnal killers.

Screened by a patch of wild fruit scrub, Old Scars blinked as his enemy thundered by behind the hounds. The baying of the

hounds told the big silver tip that they had full mastery of the trail. He minced on all fours, but not for some time did he venture forth.

As at last Old Scars came into the open, he heard the distant cries of the dogs, and his piggy eyes blinked in the bright light.

He slipped into the blood trail and shortly his great teeth were in action at the carcass of his kill. He tore out a forequarter, pausing now and then to lick his bloodied chops and snatch up a morsel or two of scattered flesh fragments.

Now he seized the quarter of beef in his jaws and carried it to a fresh place, away to the south.

In a small tamarac swamp he mounded moss and earth about the beef—setting his mark on it; then whining softly, he moved off, veering steadily, as he climbed, to the northwest.

Up in the rugged heights, the old male stretched himself, yawning. His nose was into wind, and now and then as he dozed, he startled sharply. . . . Suddenly he was startled by the reverberations of rifle shots. He sniffed as if searching for some scent sign of Karek, but there was none.

Grumbling, he lowered his big form and settled again to sleep.

By noon the following day, Old Scars came up with Karek's stiff form at almost the same spot he had discovered her as she lay wounded. This time, she was dead! She had paid for her departure from wisdom when she persisted in carrying the carcass of the calf while being hunted. Handicapped as she was by her wounded shoulder, she had permitted her hunger to displace her better judgment.

Near her dead form lay the mangled bodies of two hounds. Karek had died fighting gloriously.

Old Scars moaned as he rolled and weaved about the dead form. Twice she had been his mate. Not that that mattered, but shortly, at the full of this moon, would come the mad rush of mating passion again, and Karek, so close, was no longer available.

Now Old Scars sat on his haunches and scratched at his ever itchy scar tissue.

Karek was gone! And now the mating-moon madness was upon Old Scars. He wandered far to westward, searching every highland belt of timber and canyon draw and plateau.

NO LONGER did he catch the tang of a man scent, but his travels in search of a mate took him far from the site of his caches of food. It was midsummer and the flesh of his kills would ripen quickly.

Then just as the sun was erupting in a volcano of molten gold and crimson, Old Scars picked up the scent of a she-grizzly. He chortled and smashed at a piece of rim-rock rubble. He whirled up to his full height and snorted with satisfaction.

He found the female stretched on a small spring-fed plateau in sheep country. Shortly, led by Yak, the big old ram, the bighorn band would come down to drink and feed, but Old Scars was in no mood for such hunting tonight. He weaved up to the big female, whining plaintively. She rose and snarled, but Old Scars rolled easily away from her forepaw attacks.

Guttural strange sounds came from his cavernous throat as he wooed her throughout the night and the following day, giving her no rest. With the coming of the following evening, she weakened and allowed Old Scars to run his muzzle along her flank. She was hungry now and whined her satisfaction at the coming of this monster companion and new mate.

Old Scars rolled on to his back. He chuffed and clowned for her, then strutted back and forth, head low to the ground, now and then smashing at imaginary foes with his tremendous paws. He frothed at the jaws in his demonstration of anger and power . . . As the moon rose, casting gargantuan-like shadows from the big one's hulk, the female whimpered softly, and Old Scars moved off, knowing that she would follow . . . Shortly her flank touched his and in the soft, moonlit night, Old Scars proudly discover another, a new mate.

For the next two days, their hunger forgotten, Old Scars and his mate "honeymooned" at the upper canyon. But at last, the old she struck him sharply. She made a throat sound only he could interpret. He swung about her, head low and weaving, then all at once he whirled and started off for the lower levels.

Under the moon, Old Scars permitted his new mate to feast with him on the ripened flesh of the beef quarter he had cached. The cache had not been located by the man creature for nowhere was there any sign of him . . .

The two silver-tips lay apart in the night's full depths. Throughout the following day they lolled in the sunlight on the upper slab rock, but at night Old Scars had another treat in store for his mate. Shortly, they would part, perhaps for all time, never to mate again . . . But first, there was the major part of Old Scars' big kill, the cow.

Old Scars led the big she-bear down to the flats, into the thicket where he had turfed up his kill.

His mate rushed forward with hunger-charged eagerness, for her mating period had exacted a great toll of her strength. But Old Scars snarled savagely and drove her from the kill with a powerful butt stroke of his massive head which sent her reeling.

He growled softly—sounds which seemed to come from the depths of his cavernous belly.

There was a strangeness about this meat cache he did not like. Man creatures had visited the carcass. The tracks and signs were fairly fresh.

When again the she-bear thrust herself forward to gouge flesh with her gaping jaws, Old Scars hurled her to one side, but she could contain herself no longer. She raised herself to her full height, whirled and smashed two powerful paw strokes which toppled the old male back. Before he could recover, she was in, belly down, feasting at the kill.

Savagely the old she-bear tore out great slabs of dripping flesh. The rotted flesh came easily and she chortled and slobbered in the ecstasy of contentment, as the food commenced to fill her stomach.

On the opposite side, tantalized by her sounds of feasting, Old Scars dropped and bit sharply into a flank of his favorite food—ripened meat. He was champing on a mouthful of this dripping succulence, when suddenly he coughed and retched. He spat the food from him, regurgitating the pulped mass, too, already in his stomach.

Quickly he whirled away and hurried to the near marshes where he set about digging for medicinal roots. He devoured a quantity of this emetic food, and returned to the thicket to tear out strips of alder bark.

For some time his belly knotted in sharp cramps . . .

He moved away and in time the medicinal properties of roots and bark began to manifest their power as an antidote to the

strychnine poisoning with which the cow's carcass had been impregnated.

Time and again Old Scars regurgitated, retching violently and the purge caused by the skunk-cabbage roots began to take effect. Now he could hear the growls of the old female as she, too, suffered horribly from those belly-assailing cramps.

She reeled toward him, but he was in no condition to help her. He merely whined as she floundered on by.

Old Scars would live, but again, the man creature had struck down one of the big bear's mates. Before the female could reach the medicinal roots, her whole being shook convulsively.

And in those horrible convulsions, she died. There would be none of the progeny of Old Scars seeing light the following spring season.

THE POUND of hoofs awakened Old Scars from a sickly semi-coma. He rose shakily to his feet, reeled uncertainly a moment as the sound of approaching horse hoofbeats became clearer. Deep in the cells of his brain there was a desire to hurl himself in to attack, but his body was weakened by the poison and the purging and sickness that followed.

Old Scars had lived through the vicissitudes of nearly nineteen years of wild life because on occasion he could recognize that discretion is the better part of valor.

He dragged his bulk through the scrub, across the meadow, on past the still warm body of his recent mate. He heard sharp voice sounds from the man creature who had now dismounted at the site of Old Scars' kill.

Old Scars continued his climb, still hearing man voice sounds. He was glad that no dogs trailed him. He might quickly have been bayed and although he would have killed some dogs, he was in no condition to withstand the onslaught of man.

There was more than one man voice now, for Martin Grove had brought his foreman, Utah Ames, down to the meadow, where the M-Bar-G owner pointed with pride to the dead form of Karek.

"You see, Utah," Grove explained, "I just out-guessed the big babies. That's two and a cub this season. It was those females that were causin' all my worry . . . Well, I got 'em both—one with the Winchester, the other with poison. Now we'll mebbe have some peace at the M-Bar-G. I—uh, what's eatin' you?"

Utah Ames grunted and bit off a quid of eating tobacco.

"Yuh done a right good job, boss," he said. "On'y, yuh ain't as smart as yuh figger. Shore there was two big shes, an' they're better out uh the way, but don't forgit what I told y' : it wasn't a old she that cut down the cow, recent, but Old Scars hisownse'f. He's still roamin' . . ."



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Grove uttered a sharp oath of disgust. He had been advised that a grizzly wouldn't fall for strychnine bait. He had won on this point. He was proud—for he had boasted to the boys at the bunkhouse that, one way or another, he would clear his entire range of the menace of grizzlies and big cats. True, he had, in part, made good his boast, but what Utah had just brought to his attention filled him with further misgiving. Old Scars was still rampant . . .

"Tomorrow, we'll have a look-see for tracks, Boss," Utah grunted. "I'd know Old Scars' tracks any place because on his right forepaw he on'y has four toes. If'n he was at the kill here tonight, an' ate any uh the meat, they's a chance he had enough strength left to crawl up into the upper canyons to die somewheres in a draw. You could get the dawgs onto his trail, but—if'n he ain't daid, I'd lay a bet that—Wal, I'd still be willin' to put my money on that old silver-tip."

The men moved back to the ranch yard, and the soft night closed in with peace for Old Scars.

But at dawn, Grove and Ames were back at the kill.

Grove was delighted when Utah found the unmistakable imprint of Old Scars' four-toed paw.

"Now, Utah," Grove explained, "it's in the bag! That old killer is bedded down for the long sleep some place. I'll take the dogs an' go hunt up his cemetery."

OLD SCARS system was now fully cleansed. He ate sparingly for the next two days, and then only nibbling on vegetation. When he did desire flesh, he dug up a marmot or two.

At dawn on the third day, he stretched himself luxuriously. Now and then he rose on his hind feet and flailed the air with his forepaws, as if he slowly intended to bring his muscles back into fighting condition, as a fighter might do through shadow-boxing. But he grew hungry. The time had come for earnest feeding again.

The sun had scarcely risen when Old Scars heard the baying of dogs. He snuffed sharply, clearing his nostrils, then quickly loped in a half circle to catch the wind.

The dread scent came—the blended tang of dog, man and horse. }

All that day and night, Old Scars twisted and weaved along a stream. In the dark, he stood in midstream on the riffle's rocks, under the shadows of a large over-hanging willow, while the dogs bayed on past. He patiently waited out the passing of the horse and its rider.

The following night, with the moon bright above the highlands and valley, Old Scars hunkered on a slab rock ledge and watched the shadows of two riders go by below.

When all was clear, the old chieftain of the Bitter Roots turned and commenced a descent of the craglands.

He ambled on down to the pasture, the fenced area where Grove ranged his young calf breeder stock.

Old Scars came up on them bedded down serenely beneath the wide-spread branches of three giant cottonwoods.

Old Scars worked swiftly. He smashed down a calf as it attempted to rise. Quickly his great jaws ripped out windpipe and severed the jugular. As he tasted blood, the blended passions of hunger and hatred surcharged his fighting instincts, and the desire to kill . . .

Three head of young stock went down. Then the big old grizzly took a turn around the pasture, testing wind. Ordinarily, he liked his food ripe, but his hunger was too great tonight. He returned to the kill and tore out the most succulent parts of the smaller of the veals, devouring them with relish. Satisfied, he clamped a firm jaw hold on another carcass and rising, whirled to amble majestically from the pasture.

This time, he carried his kill far, climbing, climbing with prodigious strength, until he was sure he had reached comparative, if not complete, safety.

He could not know that as he stretched himself to rest, the man creatures had returned to the ranch and the discovery of his recent depredation. The distance was too great for even Old Scars' sharp ears to pick up the explosive sounds issuing from Mart Grove's throat, nor could he, of course, hear that muffled chuckle which escaped Utah Ames, who might easily have said to his boss, "I done told yuh so!"

At dawn the big silver tip moved on to the northwest, to seek a new range. Perhaps in the higher levels, bighorn country, he would establish his new kingdom.

TOO SICK TO DIE!

Potent Bosco's Elixir might not have been able to cure frail, peaceful Sam Hazlitt; but those bottles could sure cure the hell out of a boot-tough, gun-fighting renegade!

SAM HAZLITT was possessed of just about every ailment known to man, and a few that were exclusively his own. Hobbling painfully down Center Street with one hand on his aching back and the other invariably clutching a blue medicine bottle, he was for years a laughing stock of the fading silver town of Lincolnville, Montana. Characterized by Hale Youngman, then editor of the *Little Rockies Observer*, as "a bundle of bones glued together by a long-drawn sigh," Sam was an anomaly in Western social culture.

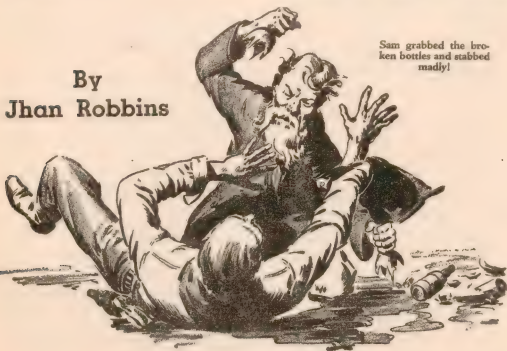
Ordinarily, even a Westerner who is lying at death's door will answer a casual "How're ya?" with a cheerful "Never felt better, thanks." But it was dangerous, Lincolnville had learned, to direct that greeting to Sam. For he would immediately tell you exactly how he felt, and it was likely to take hours.

As far as anyone had learned, Sam was born a semi-invalid. He had come West, not for riches, but for health. And it seemed to have done him little good. The rich, upland sun pouring down on his head gave him strokes and black spots; the hearty, coarse food caused rising gas, and the dry air made his breath come short.

To the end of his days, Lincolnville citizens laughed at Sam Hazlitt, but after one hot August night in 1872, they laughed politely and respectfully, out of the other side of their mouths.

That was the night that Black Tom Gehrety broke out of jail.

Tom Gehrety was a six-foot-five, gun-wild bandit, a trusted lieutenant of Kid Curry. Known for his cruel, indiscriminate shooting, he had terrorized the Little Rockies for years as a lone hand. The Lincolnville hoosegow was not the only jail that



Sam grabbed the broken bottles and stabbed madly!

By
Jhan Robbins

had failed to hold him, and his presence there was regarded with anything but pride. Rather, the men and women who peered fearfully into his cell, walked away on tiptoe, as though avoiding a case of sputtering dynamite.

On the third evening of his incarceration, he reached a long, simian arm through the bars of his cell and grabbed the frightened deputy who had come with his supper. A few minutes later he paced out into the roadway. Purple-faced and very close to death, his jailer crawled to the street, minutes later, to spread the alarm.

With the cry "Black Tom is out!" echoing up the streets, each house shut up like a feudal castle. Shutters were slammed across the windows, doors bolted and even the chimneys were stuffed. Lincolnville remembered the fate of the last town Gehrety had invaded; it was at Copper Point, only a few months ago, that the bandit had emptied his guns at random into every open window and doorway. Quivering, the populace waited for the siege.

A hundred eyes, glued to cracks, saw the giant, hulking figure of the killer appear, swaying with rage, at the head of Center Street and walk swiftly toward the center of town.

At the other end of the road, where the Wells Fargo lamp burned, a slight, limping figure appeared, with a package under its arm. The head ducked down into a giant shawl coat collar and the whole body was huddled against the driving evening breeze. It was Sam Hazlitt, hurrying to get home.

Under his left arm was clutched his monthly shipment of Bosco's Elixir, a venal-looking pink fluid that he ordered by the case and drank continuously. It was the only thing that kept him alive at all, he often declared. Obviously, he had not heard the warning about the gunman on the loose, and with his head lowered he did not see anyone in his path. From his towering height, and in his blind fury, Black Tom did not notice the little man, either, until Sam's head and shoulders, and the square corner of his opened wooden box, slammed into the bandit's stomach and knocked all the wind out of him. Tom Gehrety sat down very suddenly, clutching his shattered abdomen and gasping for breath.

At the same time, a courageous woman

thrust her head out of an attic window and shrieked, "Sammy! Run, Sammy! It's Black Tom!" Sam had plenty of time to run; the furious killer was still rattling the air back into his throat, but terror turned his nerves to helpless pulp. Besides, he hadn't run in twenty years.

The bandit didn't wait to regain his standing posture nor to draw his gun. Before scrambling to his feet, he raised his leg and aimed a pile-driving kick at his tiny, withered attacker. Sam automatically started to collapse when he saw it coming, and the blow missed him but shattered his box of bottles.

In a shower of wooden splinters and broken blue glass, thin creamy pink streams of Bosco's Elixir ran out over Sam's shoes and soaked into the muddy ground. A whole month's supply. It was just too much to be borne.

THERE is no deadlier weapon than a broken bottle, held firmly by the neck. Sam had several to choose from. Galvanized into screaming fury, he grabbed up two fine specimens and began stabbing wildly at the face and throat of the still-prostrate killer. Gehrety shrieked with pain as one vicious thrust sliced off his left ear, and another stroke half scalped him. Gaining his feet, he rushed away in the direction he had come. Blinded by streaming blood, his groping fingers could not even find the deputy's gun he had stolen half an hour before. Finding himself back at the jailhouse door, he rushed in, hands held high, and demanded medical attention.

Sam Hazlitt lay in an unconscious heap in the middle of the street among his broken bottles. Solicitous friends rushed him into a nearby house. When he recovered his senses some hours later, he was prepared for the worst.

"I'm going to die. He shot me," he moaned as he opened one eye.

"No, you're not," the doctor assured him. "You haven't got a scratch on you. You never looked better."

"I never felt worse," Sam insisted. Then a new thought occurred to him. "What about Black Tom?" he asked.

"He'll live to hang," the doctor answered. "In fact, he's already making a very quick recovery. I prescribed Bosco's Elixir."

TOO MUCH ROPE?

Bill Longley's body jerked spasmodically at the end of the rope—jerked and swayed, and then hung limp. But who was the man that, two days later, boarded a ship for South America—and looked so much like that merciless—and thoroughly hanged—killer!

By G. Arthur Alan

PEOPLE had come from miles around to witness the hanging. Rigs and buggies cluttered the area around the courthouse at Giddings, Lee County, Texas. They stood around waiting, smoking and talking, casting anxious nervous eyes toward the new-built scaffold with its dangling noose where a man was soon to kick out his life. Little did they know that they were about to witness one of the biggest miscarriages of justice in all of Texas.

William P. Longley the condemned man, a killer and an outlaw, had been sentenced to hang for the murder of Wilson Anderson, a farmer who tilled his crops near to the holdings of Longley's relatives. Previous to this, however, Longley had committed a long list of crimes for which he'd never been punished. Born near Austin, Texas, to wealthy parents, he had grown up in the rough reconstruction days following the Civil War. Like many young cowboys of that day, Bill Longley went bad.

Longley spent several years with the notorious Baker gang of rustlers and then hearing that a farmer named Anderson had been implicated in the killing of a cousin, Cole Longley, in a land dispute, Bill returned to Texas to even the score. He hid out in the brush in a field where Anderson was plowing, and when the farmer passed, Longley leaped up and emptied both barrels of a shotgun into the farmer's back. He'd boasted that he was out to get Anderson, and after the farmer's murder that part of Texas became too hot for him. Longley made himself scarce for a while.

About a year later a tall, dark, wavy-

haired man turned up at the farm of William Lay and asked for work. But Lay became suspicious of the stranger and summoned the sheriff who recognized him as the now much wanted Bill Longley, and Longley was arrested and thrown in jail. He escaped, however, the next night and made his way back to the Lay farm where he confronted the farmer and charged him with turning him over to the sheriff. Before Lay could either confirm or deny the accusation he was sprawled in the dust of his farmyard, blood oozing from his body, and six bullets from Longley's gun in him.

Longley fled Texas for good then, drifting over the state line into Louisiana where he took up a small farm. He lived here in comparative safety for over a year under the name of William Jackson, having grown a spade beard meanwhile and also a mustache. But fate was to catch up with him. Idly sketching one day on a wanted poster out for one William P. Longley, a Texas killer, Constable Courtney of the nearby town of Desot Parish drew in a spade beard and mustache on the killer's tintype, and was startled with the result. For glaring up at him from the reward dodger was the likeness of William Jackson, the farmer whom he'd come to know quite well!

Longley submitted to arrest rather meekly, and he did not deny his identity. He did, however, express his wish to be taken back to Lee County, Texas to stand trial for the killing of Wilson Anderson. In Lee county, Longley's brother Jim and other close relatives were wealthy and in-



fluent. In exchange for this wish, Bill Longley promised to wave extradition to Texas. So it was that he was brought back to Lee County and tried for the murder of Wilson Anderson over two years after the killing took place.

His trial was short and he was sentenced to be hanged. Longley's relatives had spent a good deal of money to hire the best criminal lawyers in the country, and though they lost the trial they did win for him a stay of execution. Longley lay in jail for eighteen months awaiting the execution, and finally, October 11, 1878, the day came, gray and cold and drizzly, but that didn't seem to dampen the condemned man's spirits. He joked with his guards as they'd taken him from the cell to the gallows. A troop of cavalry had ridden in from a nearby fort to help guard the prisoner as there had been a rumor that Longley's friends were going to take the prisoner from the sheriff. They strung out on both sides of the road, following the rig in which Longley was being transported, and the outlaw jokingly remarked about the splendid escort they were giving him on his last ride on earth.

The outlaw mounted the gallows platform. A hood was fitted over his head and the noose placed around his neck. Sheriff Jim Brown tripped the trap door, and Longley's body was suddenly jerking spasmodically at the end of the rope, jerking and swaying.

After eleven minutes the body was cut down by one of Longley's relatives. Two doctors pronounced the outlaw dead, and the body was then placed in a coffin along with the hangrope, and the coffin was carried away in a wagon by the weeping relatives. It was the end of Bill Longley, notorious outlaw, killer and gunslinger—or was it?

Two days after the hanging in Alama-

gordas, a man closely resembling Longley was seen by an old friend who'd known him well, booking passage on a steamer bound for South America.

"Bill—" the old friend had called, pulling at the outlaw's sleeve. "Bill! I'll be damned! I—I thought that you were hanged—"

But the man resembling Longley only glared momentarily at his old friend with icy eyes, jerked his sleeve free from his grasp and hurried away up the gangway. With a blast of the whistle the steamer moved away from the pier.

How did Longley escape the hangrope? Over a hundred witnesses had seen him hanged, and surely no Texas killer deserved a hanging more. Yet here he was aboard a ship sailing for South America. Old-timers, who were in the know at the time, still tell the story.

For a substantial sum Longley's relations bribed Sheriff Jim Brown to fit Longley with a special harness to fit next to the skin beneath his clothing. The harness consisted of an iron collar to fit around the neck, to which leather straps had been attached to go down around the insteps of the outlaw's feet. At the hanging the noose was placed over this iron collar, preventing the outlaw's neck from being broken, and the straps under the insteps had broken the fall when the trap door was sprung.

The Longleys buried the empty coffin in the family plot in Giddings, Texas. Some say that the body of a murdered Mexican was placed in the coffin to take the outlaw's place in case the story leaked out and the grave was exhumed. They even erected a headstone on the grave of Bill Longley, outlaw, and the official documents of Lee County, Texas, record the fact that William P. Longley was hanged by the neck until he was dead on the eleventh day of October, 1878.

WELL KEPT

There have been jails and jails in the old West, but one of the strangest of all was the hoosegow in use for a long time in Dodge City. I got this story from Bob Wright, Dodge City's oldest citizen. A fellow who owned a vacant lot just beyond Bob's store had a well dug about fifteen feet deep. Well, during a ruckus in the dance hall one night, a hellion who had shot a girl in the leg ran that way and fell in the well, while trying to escape his pursuers. They found him there, and since he was already in the well, someone got the idea of leaving him there until he could be brought to trial. After that, any one who made a nuisance of himself was just let down in the well and kept there until he either sobered up or agreed to leave town. It served its purpose for some time, and was always filled to capacity.

—George Boldt



TRAIL BLAZERS *of the* FRONTIER

• DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHTS IN THE LIVES OF OUR PIONEERS •

by CEDRIC W. WINDAS



To recount the many adventures of Kit Carson would take several volumes. But here is an account of one day's work to prove the courage and resourcefulness of this intrepid plainsman. In 1832, when he was 23, Indians stole his horses, and Kit set out to recover them.



Leaving his camp on the Old Spanish Trail, he plunged into the badlands that served as sanctuary for the fleeing redmen. They left two warriors to ambush Kit if he followed them. Carson sensed the trap, and by-passing the spot, backtracked and killed both of them.



The main body of horse-thieves split their party to confuse Kit. But he pursued the smaller group, guessing they would be driving the stolen bronds. However, within sight of the robbers, Kit's mount broke its leg, leaving him afoot. The jeering Indians rode off, confident Carson could no longer follow them.



But they reckoned without the plainsman's perseverance. Scaling a rocky ridge around which the thieves had to ride, Kit slid down the other side, took them by surprise. He killed five of them and recovered his horses. Bearing seven scalps by way of interest he returned to camp.... and called it a day.

When each morning sun shone on the bullet-bitten bodies of murdered cowpunchers along Damnation Bend's dusty street, honest citizens trembled behind drawn shutters. . . . For word had come that Dodge City Frank was heading for a show-down with Breed Ringo, who laughed alike at the laws of God and man!



• • GUN-GOD OF

CHAPTER ONE

"Hit the River!"

THEY knew they were at least inside the rim of Indian country, but danger was far from their thoughts that warm Autumn day. They sat in the shade of shaggy cottonwoods on the bank of the Missouri with their legs in the water up to the knees, their toes wriggling in the soft river mud. They wore nothing except their stout buckskin shirts. Lean and gray old Choctaw Charley Chadrick sat on a flat rock slightly downstream from tall, sandy-haired Dodge City Frank Devine, minutes passing between them in unbroken silence.

At the moment there was not a care in their heads. Their wagon stood behind them in a little swale; their four black mules grazed contentedly in the rich grass under the trees. Ahead of them would lie adventure, fights or frolics, but they would meet such matters when they came—and neither particularly cared a hoot how matters might turn out. Life was good anywhere with twenty thousand dollars in gold in a false bed of the wagon, and with stout mules to take them wherever they might want to drive.

"Things like this take a fella back



Silently the Indian leaped from the rock above. . . .



●
**A Thrilling
 Action-Packed
 Frontier Novel**

**By
 Tom Roan**
 ●

DAMNATION BEND



to his boyhood." Chadrick broke the long spell of silence with one of his rare grins. "Some folks don't believe in it, but I do. Yes, sir, I sometimes just can't wait for the warm days to come, an' ever' summer I wash all over at least twice; makes me smell better—I think."

"Then set as yuh set—an' don't get shot!" A voice came from behind them, and as they turned their heads with startled jerks they saw the speaker, long and lean and garbed in tattered old buckskins, a six-shooter filling each hand. At his side in the tall grass rose another, short and heavy-set, his face covered with a matted black beard, also holding Colts.

"Set, I said!" The tall one spoke again as Chadrick and Devine made a show of coming to their feet. "There's two more with us, an' us two are standin' 'twix yuh an' yore guns. We won't be long. Hit the river an' swim to the other side. *Hit 'er!*"

A shot punctuated the last two words, the bullet slapping the rock just beneath old man Chadrick's lifting tailbone. An instant later another shot had roared at Devine, its bullet kicking up blades of grass a bare three inches from his left hip.

"Hit river, damn yuh, hit!" The lean man fired again, the bullet so close this time that Chadrick thought he was shot. "Hit 'er!"

There was no chance to argue. Both

men were soon in the water, and even then the bullets came after them, ripping up spray to the right and left all the way across the river. On the other side they had to take to the rocks and flop down on their faces. For the next ten minutes bullets slapped bits of rock around them each time they tried to lift their heads and see what was going on on the opposite river bank.

"Damn 'em!" Chadrick finally wailed. "Damn 'em to hell, Frank, they're stealin' our wagon an' the mules!"

"And our clothing and guns!" yelled Devine, taking another quick look and dropping back with his face stinging from a shower of splintered rock as a bullet struck for him. "This is worse than murder!"

"Wait over there, fellas!" called the old man, desperately. "Don't leave us just in our shirts!"

"Go to hell!" The words came back with an outburst of laughter. "I once read in the Bible where the Lord helps him what helps 'imself, an' that's what we're doin'. We'd atooked them shirts if my pard hadn't been in such a hell of a hurry to see yuh hit the water. Much obliged! The next time yuh pore fools come to this here Territory yuh may have sense enough to keep yore pants on."

They could only curse and groan as they took quick looks to see the wagon being driven away with two riders behind it, each leading a saddled horse, and two men on the wagon. In no time at all it was over a rise and clattering on up the river as fast as the mules could trot.

"And now," nodded Devine, bitterly. "I guess we can swim back."

"An' why?" demanded the old man. "Hell, we're just as well off on one bank as the other without pants!"

"There's a settlement up the river somewhere!"

"An' we just walk into it, I reckon," frowned Chadrick, "an' say, 'Well, folks, here we are, ready for yuh to greet us!' Damn it, Frank, I ain't never gone callin' on folks without my pants! They'd shoot us for undecent exposure!"

"Pants are pants, Charley, and this is one time when we've got to go after them. We can't sit here and grow a couple of pair!"

THEY crossed back hoping that something had been overlooked and left behind. They found their socks, dumped from their boots, but there was nothing else, not even a chew of tobacco left for the old man. But the socks were at least something. Padding the soles with leaves and grass, they drew them on carefully, took one more look around, and started moving, the tails of their shirts spanking them as they walked.

"We'll find 'em!" Chadrick said, his eyes on the hills and humps along the river. "And when we do, let 'em watch out! I think I'll drown the fella what shot all them rock splinters in my tailbone. Just hold his head underwater to hear him blubber until he's dead!"

Devine kept his mouth shut, but blue fire smouldered in his eyes. Never had either of them heard of such a thing being done to men anywhere in the East or out here in this wild country.

Intent on following the tracks left by the wagon, they had swung away from the river where it made a wide bend to eastward and were plodding along in a narrow break between two tall hills when Devine suddenly stopped and threw out his hand behind him.

"Indians, Charley!" he hissed. "Four of them!"

"An' they've got pants—some kind of pants!" nodded the old man. "But, look, there's more'n four. Two's awalkin'!"

"Those are white people!" Devine had stepped behind a couple of thick little bushes. "A man and a girl—and they're prisoners!"

The group was still about a mile away, two reds in front on fine-looking horses that had evidently been stolen from some white man, and two on shaggy ponies bringing up the rear. The man and the girl walked between them, the man in stout homespun gray and the girl in a blue dress with her pale hair shining in the sunlight. Long sticks had been placed across their backs and shoulders; their arms were spread wide; their wrists were securely tied near the ends of the sticks, making them look like walking crosses.

"Damn bold about it, I'd say," grunted Chadrick as they watched and waited. "How're we gonna take 'em?"

"With rocks, if we take them at all!"

Devine was studying them as he stood there in a crouch. "It looks like they're coming straight toward us, and it's our only chance."

"If we had guns," frowned the old man, "it'd be easy. But if we had guns," his frown deepened, "we'd still have pants. But, anyhow, I ain't yet seen the fella what can beat me throwin' a rock, an' this time I know my aim's gotta be good."

They swung back, each hunting the proper place and praying for the Indians to come on instead of swinging to the right or left at the last moment. Soon they could see that they were young bucks and arrogant. An older buck in the party would have pointed out the possible danger, but as they came closer Devine and the old man could see that the two in the lead were reeling in their saddles. That meant that they had been loaded to the eyes somewhere on whiskey.

"An' they've got guns, too!" nodded Chadrick, eagerly. "An' white men's saddles on them two leadin' hosses! This looks like an answer to a prayer."

"If we take them, yes!" agreed Devine, down now on his hands and knees in the bushes, rounding up a small pile of stones in front of him. "This is one time you'd better not miss, Charley."

"Not unless we both wanta go to hell fast!" Chadrick was rounding up his own pile of ammunition. "We'll shoot for the two ahead first, an' then do our damndest by the others."

It looked as if it was almost cut and dried for them as the redskins drew close and closer. Whatever kind of stuff they had been drinking was already getting the best of them. The bucks in the lead were rocking more and more and gripping their saddle horns with both hands. Their faces were drawn and pale. War-paint had been there, but streams of perspiration had about washed it away. Now and then they moaned as if in agony, and their eyes had grown dull.

The pair behind were not much better, and yet they had to be, for they rode bareback, a simple grass rope on their ponies. One of them carried an old army musket strapped with the muzzle downward at his back. The other, evidently the youngest of the lot, seemed to have nothing more than a bow and a quiver of arrows. Both made

a poor showing when it came to the ones in the lead, each armed with a good rifle and six-shooter, with plenty of cartridges in their broad belts. That pair, one could guess, had been doing a great deal of riding and looting before the following bucks had joined up with them.

"Now!" Devine yelled, and even as he yelled two stones were on their way, carrying all the fury of two bitterly desperate men. As they struck, each true to its mark from so short a distance, the two Indians tumbled awkwardly from their saddles.

Old Choctaw Charley Chadrick seemed to go crazy now. He threw only one stone at the following pair of bucks, missed his man by a yard, and plunged on to the two who had been downed. Grimly bent on making it a clean sweep, Devine's next stone struck the buck with the musket squarely on the side of the face, bringing him spilling heels overhead from the startled pony—and then saw that the one with the bow and arrows was wheeling and making his get-away.

"We're losing one, Charley!" yelled Devine. "He's getting away!"

"To hell with 'im!" bawled back the old man, mauling a downed buck in the face with his fists. "This rooster's got pants! Grab the other'n 'fore he starts to get up!"

Devine sent one more stone after the fleeing Indian, and was darting forward, the white man and the girl staring as if more afraid of these two wild men in shirts than the Indians themselves.

CHAPTER TWO

Damnation Bend

"I'M JOE BROWN," explained the short, rather stout white man with a drooping, mouse-colored little mustache, after the three Indians had been mauled unconscious, and the stick had been removed from his back. "This is my daughter, Letty. These Indians came to our cabin in Grass Valley this morning just before daybreak. They were on us before we knew it."

"An' us, now," grinned Chadrick, "we had to have some pants. The fit I got ain't none too good, an' neither is Frank's, but they shore Gawd beat just the sun an'

the breeze. He's Frank Devine. I'm Charley Chadrick. I'm shore glad yuh folks got caught by Indians who wear pants. Where was they takin' yuh to?"

"We never knew!" answered the girl, swinging her arms briskly. "There is always something like this happening in Grass Valley—somebody getting shot, fire set to a house, or children stolen and run off to the hills and kept for days at a time. None of the settlers are safe, and they say it will get worse as long as we stay."

"Indians are queer critters," frowned Chadrick. "Me an' Frank's been tradin' or fightin' with 'em clear to southwest Texas, an' we still don't know what to expect of 'em the most of the time."

"But it's not all Indian work!" exclaimed Brown, rubbing his wrists and forearms. "We have Breed Ringo to thank for the most of it!"

"And who," Devine asked, "is Breed Ringo?"

"You haven't heard of him!" Brown's eyes widened. "My God, you must be new to the country and the river too! Breed Ringo, gentleman, is the lord, the god, the hellfire and damnation of Damnation Bend! That's on up the river, in the lower mouth of Grass Valley and still twelve or fifteen miles ahead of you—if you were going in that direction."

"And we were—until we lost our wagon." Devine grinned. He was garbed now in Indian pants. The unconscious red he had robbed had been thrown weaponless and half-bare into the bushes. In the shortest manner possible, he related the tale of the four men who had taken the wagon. Brown and the girl looked at each other.

"That wagon and your mules has probably been taken to Damnation Bend, Mr. Devine." Brown was rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "If it has, you'll never get your hands on it again. Breed Ringo will own it when you get there—"

"An' Breed Ringo," shot in Chadrick, "will give it up!"

"You don't know Ringo," smiled Brown. "He'll have a bill of sale for the wagon and the mules, and you won't see the men who took them away from you, unless Breed decides he wants you to see them. He's the law, the only law, in the Bend and

for miles around—and for sixty miles in either direction up or down the river from his steamboat landing. You are only two men. Breed is the government, the Army and even the Navy, you might say, and all the courts of the land as well. He's the duly appointed and sworn United States Commissioner out here. In his big hands, my friends, he has the right of life or death. If he tells his gunman crew to hang you, then, sir, you *hang*!"

THEY learned more of Breed Ringo as they rode away from the spot, the girl up behind Devine on one of the captured horses, Chadrick on the other, and Brown on the Indian pony they had managed to catch. They left the Indians there in spite of Chadrick wanting to shoot them and leave them for the buzzards to pick to the bare bones. To have tried to question them would have been a waste of time in their condition, and but little better had they been sober.

"We couldn't get anything out of them," explained Brown. "Nothing except that we had no right in the valley. Two are Cheyennes as you can see, the others Sioux. A lot of mixed breeds are riding these days. But where they got the stuff they were drinking was a slight mystery. We are certain they had had nothing when they came, and they had to stop for it on a rimrock about four miles from our cabin. That meant that it was put there and waiting for them—and by a white man at that!"

"And," Devine had wanted to know, "how many settlers do you have in your Grass Valley?"

"Forty families now." Brown scowled thoughtfully. "Did have eighty-six, but they decided to move on after so much trouble. Ringo sold us the land, you see, and Ringo wants it back, although he doesn't say it in plain words. He only hints when some of us go to him."

"I see." Devine nodded now, the scarecrow staring ahead. "Every frontier has had its Breed Ringo in one form or another. Why doesn't somebody take the story back to Washington?"

"And have them laugh at you!" Brown curled his lip. "Sir, you would not get anywhere! The smart boys have appointed Ringo. They'll not admit mistakes back there."

"Why, hell no!" growled Chadrick. "The only thing yuh can do with a joker like that is to shoot holes in his belly an' let 'im die from the unnatural inrush of air to his in'ards. Then," he grinned, "it ain't murder. Yuh didn't know he was so rotten inside fresh air would bust 'im clear hell open. We'll probably come to that when we go to get our wagon an' them mules back."

"You'll come to lead or a rope," warned Brown, "when you try that!"

"Because everybody is afraid of him!" cried the girl, no longer able to keep silent. "Dad, this country has made you a coward!"

"I hate to have you say that, Letty!"

"But it's true!" She wasn't backing down after going so far. "You don't want to tell these men any more than you just have to tell them, and I know why. You're afraid they might quote you, afraid of what might happen when the word reached Breed Ringo's ears. Ringo is a thief, a liar, a plain government rat, feeding on the people's money!"

"Letty!" half-yelled Brown. "Watch your tongue!"

The girl pressed her face against Devine's wide back and started to cry. "Why should I? You came here with all the goods to start a general store in the valley. Others things came for you on the boats, but they were swallowed in Breed Ringo's river warehouses. He told you you were not to open anything in the valley, and he bluffed you out. You didn't get paid for the things he took away from you and sent to the store Sam Wade is supposed to own in the Bend. He laughed in your face and mine when you told him you were going to put in a claim against the steamboats for the goods you never received. And you took it without a word when he suggested that I might get a job in the honky-tonk Lige Parker is supposed to own—when everybody knows that Breed Ringo owns everything in the Bend. I—I'm half-sick of you, Dad!"

"Letty!"

"Don't yell at 'er!" Chadrick looked at him with a mean glint in his faded old eyes. "It's about time this gal come out and said what's on her mind! We know you're scared to death of this Ringo, but, by Gawd, me an' Dodge City Frank De-

vine ain't! Keep talkin' gal, keep talkin'!"

"Wait, don't encourage her!" Brown threw up his hands helplessly. "I have troubles enough without it. We'll let Damnation Bend speak for itself, for there it lies."

They had come to the back of a tall, sharp rise. Ahead of them now the country dipped away, the river twisting back in a sharp, snake-like bend. On the tip of the elbow of that bend lay the little frontier town. One street cut through the center of it, running from the head of a steep flight of stairs at the landing and straight on back to where a break between two huge humps of hills marked the entrance to Grass Valley.

"That's Damnation Bend," nodded Brown. "Log-walled and sod-roofed mostly, and forty shakes meaner than its name. I think I'll have Letty get down and walk with me before we get there. One of Breed Ringo's so-called deputy marshals might take a notion to arrest me for stealing this Indian pony—and you two for stealing the horses you're riding. I think I would get rid of them before getting into town."

"You're just plain hell-alive scared, Brown!" growled Chadrick. "Just like yore gal says. Me, now, I'm ridin' this hoss straight on into town, an' I know danged well Frank will do the same. Say, Frank," his eyes were suddenly lighting, "ain't that our wagon an' mules we see 'way down there in that big corral?"

"That," nodded Devine, "is our outfit, Charley. Before we're much older we'll have the outfit back again, Ringo or no Breed Ringo!"

"TAKE him out and hang him tomorrow morning at sunrise." Breed Ringo was bringing his afternoon court to a close on the long, broad room above the Red Saddle. The short, hump-shouldered little Grass Valley would-be farmer had had a fair trial. Ringo had taken more than two hours of the afternoon to hear the case. John Walsh had killed a man, and there was no doubt about it. One Walt Laird had been found shot through the head and stomach no more than fifty yards behind the old man's sod-roofed cabin. They had had trouble, each had made threats, and death had come to Laird. His wife and two half-grown grandsons would have to

look to somebody else in this hard-bitten country to feed and clothe them.

"But—but I didn't kill Walt!" wailed the old man, slinging his toil-worn hands wildly. "There wasn't no blood found on the ground back there where he was lyin'. Yuh can't kill a man without him bleedin'—not when yuh shoot 'im through the head an' the belly too!"

"Take him out of here," ordered Ringo, calmly. "And if he doesn't keep his mouth shut, close it for him."

It was a scene Damnation Benders had witnessed many times in the past: an aged woman sobbing, with two grandsons supporting her to keep her from falling to the floor, and at the same time holding her back to restrain her from trying to follow her husband down the long back stairway to the little stone jail at the edge of the river.

Court room cleared now, Breed Ringo, massive and darkly handsome, sat there with his back to the river. A man of fifty, he carried himself stiffly, always garbed in black except for his fondness for tall white beavers.

Link Niel and Chip Modock had ushered the prisoner from the room, and they were soon back. Niel, long and lean and hard as nails, and Modock, short and pudgy, both claimed to be originally from the high mountains of West Virginia. Niel glanced at the empty room and spoke with a grin.

"An' that's maybe stop John Walsh's trouble-stirrin' in the valley. I'd like to see Joe Brown handed the same thing. People in the valley keep pointin' him out an' moanin' about how he was robbed, an' it ain't a good thing, Judge. By Gawd, it ain't good!"

"Brown and his daughter," Ringo looked up at the ceiling with one of his slow, all-knowing little smiles, "are right now taking a rather long, long walk to see how much their feet can stand. They won't be back. Before they quit walking they'll be in sight of Hooker's Landing, sixty weary miles down the river, and there they'll be released to catch the first boat that comes along and put this country forever behind them. I have an idea that John Walsh will be on the same boat."

"But—but," put in the slower thinking Modock, "we're gonna hang him in the mornin'!"

"Don't always be a blockhead, Chip." Ringo leaned forward and looked at him with a scowl. "There are some men you just don't hang or shoot—and get completely away with it. Walsh and Brown are such men. At some dark hour tonight—well," he shrugged, "a friend or two will come along and find it possible to pry the locks off the jail door with a crowbar and let John Walsh run for it. See the point? Is it clear to you now?"

"I'll see to it!" Niel grinned broadly as he answered him. "Chip was allus kind of dumb as hell. He—"

A noise on the forward stairway leading down into the big room below cut him off. Up the stairs came a man—mountain in a white apron that was Bill Stack, one of the bartenders. Weighing close to three hundred, he was as red as a beet from merely climbing the stairs.

"Judge," he gasped, "there's two of the damndest fellas yuh ever saw downstairs wantin' to see yuh. One's got Indians pants on 'im that just about comes to his knees, an' they've both got socks on their feet in place of boots. I don't like the looks of 'em."

"And what," demanded Ringo, "do they want to see me about?"

"We can probably explain it easier, Ringo," answered a voice at the head of the stairs behind the bartender as two men appeared almost as shadows, the younger of the two speaking. "We came after our mules and our wagon standing in one of your corrals."

"Just what in the hell," the dangerous old rumble that always meant a fight was coming into Breed Ringo's tone, "do you mean by *your* mules and *your* wagon?"

"You heard me the first time, I guess." Devine's voice was even, almost a gentle purring, and he was telling him what had happened down the river but not mentioning the Browns. "And, of course," he wound up, "we know they couldn't have been here in your hands more than an hour or two, and we've come for them."

"I bought those mules, stranger," Breed Ringo's voice was as hard as cracking ice now. "I also have a bill of sale for them and the wagon. You haven't anything to show that you ever saw or heard of wagons or mules in this part of the country or any other. Now get out!"

"Only not too quick, Breed Ringo!" It was done faster than powder exploding from a spark. Devine had been standing there loosely, looking like some easy mark in his garb, but now a six-shooter had flung up and into his hand, its muzzle steady as a rock as it covered Ringo. "We came for what belongs to us, and if fire-works start around here, then Breed Ringo will be the first man to die."

"Which is my sentiments, too." The old man had stepped from behind Devine now, a grin on his face and a cocked six-shooter in his gnarled hand, a scarred thumb hooked like a snake's head over the hammer. "Yuh mighta been a big squirt back in Washington where hawgs appoint the hawgs, but Dodge City Frank's tellin' yuh the truth."

"Dodge City Frank Devine!" It was probably the first time any man in Damnation Bend had ever seen Breed Ringo's face go white. Slowly, like a man with a great weight upon him, he was getting to his feet, big hands pushed forward in front of him, the fingers wide-spread as if to hold off the expected fire and lead. "I—I've heard of you, Devine! You—you were marshal down there—"

"Until," cut in Devine, "too many lice like you were sent out to run things. But," he shrugged, "we're not here to argue or to dig into the past. You'll walk out of here and over to the corrals with us. And, yes, we'll take those two marshal monkeys with us, after Choctaw Charley takes their guns to make sure they'll behave. We'll also go out the back way and let that fellow out of jail, the one you're supposed to hang in the morning, and take him along with us to see you harness the mules."

"Damn you, Frank Devine," some of the old bull-roar was trying to get back into Ringo's voice, "you can't do this to me in my town! I know your past reputation. You pulled something like this in Dodge City! But—but, by God, I run Damnation Bend, and I'm the only law here—"

"An' the lord, the gawd, the hellfire, too, they say!" cut in old man Chadrick with a grin. "We know all about yuh, Breed, but if yuh don't wanta die yuh better not monkey with Frank."

"He's telling you, Ringo." Devine smiled at him now. "We're going out of here.

You're going right along with us. If even a gravel is tossed at us, you'll die so damned fast your head'll swim. All we want today is just what belongs to us, and we're here to get it. You'd better send this tub of guts who calls himself a bartender back downstairs to warn all your gun experts to lay off of us.

"Charley," he spoke to the old man from the side of his mouth, eyes appearing fixed on Ringo, "take the hardware off the other two, and then you can take what you can find in the way of weapons off of Ringo. Not," he added with a wicked little grin, "that I'm afraid he would have guts enough to pull anything right fast with his own hand. His kind never do. They have rats like this to do their dirty work."

Three minutes later he was kicking Breed Ringo out on the rear landing and heading him down the long stairs in front of him while Choctaw Charley Chadrick brought up the rear with the two marshals.

CHAPTER THREE

Gunsmoke Mule Race

NEVER in his entire life had anything like this happened to Breed Ringo. It was sickening when he was forced to realize that a man with all the authority and backing in the world could suddenly have it snatched away from him when his own life was the pawn. Twice while he was harnessing the mules he felt as if all control were about to desert him.

Link Niel and Chip Modock had not been called upon to do a thing other than hand Ringo the keys to the jail. Ringo, himself, had been forced to let John Walsh out, startled and wondering if they had come ahead of time to hang him. The two marshals were sitting in the middle of the corral now in the foot-deep dust, with Choctaw Charley Chadrick behind them, cocked six-shooter still in his hand and an ugly grin on his old face as Chadrick gummed a little chew of tobacco.

The crowds were the worst, cutting a man to the bone. Men—and even women and children—seemed to have come running from everywhere to gang up just outside the corral and stand there staring through the high fence of stout pine and cottonwood poles. Many mouths were slacked open with sheer amazement, eyes

popping at the sight in front of them, even as the released and yet-wondering John Walsh stood by the wagon and stared. No one laughed or offered a word of comment. They were too afraid of what could happen to them afterwards for such a thing, and yet in the eyes of many of them there was a keen sense of enjoyment.

There were several times when Ringo felt that he had come to the end of it and could not stand it a second longer. He was twice on the verge of wheeling and flying into this damned Dodge City Frank Devine's face and trying to make a fight of it. But he knew this man. Too many men had talked about him. Devine, some had said, would never be bested or killed until he was found sound asleep and shot through the back of the head by the Devil himself. He had been in Dodge City, in the Southwest, and five or six more places where the going had been as tough as any man could find anywhere in the West. What had brought him here was yet very much of a mystery. Ringo could only hope that he was just passing through the country. If only those four damned fools had not tried to steal his confounded wagon and his mules! They'd catch hell for this!

"Now—now," he half-choked on his rage when the last mule was in place, "I hope you're satisfied! But I'll tell you one thing, Frank Devine, I'll have the entire United States Government on your neck before I'm through with you!"

"And how do you know," Devine grinned back at him, "that I haven't been sent out here to get on your neck? It's quite possible, you know. You can get on the seat now and start to drive—after somebody in the crowd outside opens the gate for us."

"But—but," cried Ringo, "I'm not going anywhere! Damn it, Devine, I'm the United States Commissioner of this district and—and," his voice became almost a squeal, "I'm not going anywhere, I say, anywhere!"

"They're fairly easy to drive!" Devine caught him by the arm, swung him around and gave him another swift kick. "Hit the seat like we were told by some of your scummy crew to hit the river. Hop aboard, Charley, you and Mr. Walsh. Ringo's going to drive us out into Grass Valley. We may want to buy some of that good Government land out there."

"Shoot 'im, somebody!" wailed Ringo as he crawled up over the front wheel. "Shoot him!"

"We can't, Judge!" yelled a black-beard on the outside of the fence. "He's got a cocked gun on yuh—an' a shot would only make 'im pull that damn trigger!"

He drove on out of the corral when the gate was swung open by two big, rough-looking settlers who seemed a trifle eager to have some little hand in the cause of his misery. Cold-blooded murder was throbbing in every vein, as Devine stood calmly behind him with the muzzle of his six-shooter resting firmly between his broad shoulder blades, finger on the trigger. More than a dozen men were already dashing away for horses on which to follow the wagon.

It was murder, high-treason, and all the black crimes one could think of according to Ringo's raving. To Dodge City Frank Devine and old Choctaw Charley it was a plain case of cold steel nerves playing out a game that had to work to keep them from dying; and probably John Walsh would have died with them to help satisfy some of Ringo's terrible malice.

They drove straight on for the valley, the break between the two blunt shoulders of hills narrowing ahead. Chadrick rode backward, sitting on the rear end of the wagon with a rifle across his lap, his eyes on the riders trailing them. Walsh—still scared, his eyes popping like those of a rabbit getting ready to flee from the hounds—kept himself huddled to the center of the wagon, not a word coming from him.

"This is going to cost you and that old coot your lives, Devine!" Ringo was so mad he was slobbering all over his chin. "I have power! I *am* power, I tell you! I can call out the United States Army on you and those Grass Valley yokels for this day's work!"

"And that," nodded Devine, "makes about the eleventh time you've said the same old thing, Breed. But what have the people in Grass Valley got to do with it? You've sold them on the same old song all along that you and the Government want to help them, and now you'd sic the army on them! All you want is the money you can get out of them, and once you have it you start trying to run them out so that you can sell

to some one else. It's an old, old game, Ringo, but it does have a lot of gold in it."

RINGO opened his mouth to snarl back something, but a yell of terror came out of it instead of words. They were inside the break now, rocks and brush running up at either side of them. From the high top to their left an arrow had come down, a long slender shaft that made only a faint whisper of sound until it drove into the wagon seat under the edge of Ringo's thigh, striking so close it cut through the leg of his trousers and lifted him with a wild jerk.

It was the young Indian who had made his escape when Devine and old man Chadrick were downing his three companions with rocks, and he must have been shooting to drive that arrow through Devine. Standing up now in his excitement, he was whipping another arrow to his bow when both Devine and Chadrick opened fire on him, the old man with the rifle and Devine firing two quick shots from his six-shooter. Both must have scored a hit, for the youth was suddenly plunging forward, a rigid thing in the air until he landed on a shoulder of rock, bounced, and then came on down, legs and arms flaying as he landed in the brush below.

And then hell broke out . . . With snorts the mules lunged forward, the leaders pawing the air as if trying to fly. The right front wheel of the wagon struck a rock as large as a man's head, throwing the wagon up on one side, and both Devine and the big Ringo were pitched over the wheel, coming down together on the ground, the crazy mules whipping on with Chadrick hastily scrambling toward the front seat to grab the ends of the long lines.

It was here that Ringo really started to fight. He was up an instant ahead of Devine, a booted foot shooting a furious kick forward and grazing his head. Before he could recover Devine had grabbed his foot, showing it on upward and throwing him flat of his back. As he went down Ringo started to yell to the horseman following them.

"Close in!" he bawled. "Close in, men, he's dropped his gun!"

Devine heard the horses coming as he lurched on and drove his fist into Ringo's big, dark face, then wheeled back to recover

the six-shooter. The noise of the hurrying hoofs was like the wild pounding of drums in his ears for a couple of seconds, and then everything was drowned out by the long-rolling roar of a gun in from the rocks on the other side from where the young Indian had come plunging down.

Looking up, Devine could see the sunlight glinting off a head-full of blonde curls. Outlined against the rocks was the old musket he and Chadrick had taken from the Indians and given to Joe Brown. The Indian who had loaded it must have poured the barrel half full of shot and powder, making a charge that would have stopped a buffalo bull dead in his tracks.

The one shot the girl fired was like damnation itself, striking men and horses, and lifting a devilish cloud of dust. In confusion now they were curving back, men rocking and reeling in their saddles, their oaths boiling sky-high.

"Run for it, Frank, an' bring 'im with yuh!" The yell came now from Chadrick, six hundred yards away where he had managed to stop the mules and swing the wagon around. He was pointing at the rim of the valley, his face white with excitement. "There's a whole passel of Indians up there above yuh, an' more acomin'!"

"God, no!" Up now, blood running from his nose and mouth, Breed Ringo seemed as pale as a sheet. "I told the fools—" He caught himself, glaring at Devine, then at the retreating horsemen going back toward town as if they had seen something that scared the wits out of them. "We—we've got to get out of here, you fool!"

"Keep going right on!" Devine had the six-shooter again, ramming it in his ribs and giving Ringo a shove. "This looks like some little plan of yours that's kicking backward on you! *Get going!*"

THE GIRL came running down to them, her face white, the old musket hugged to her bosom and no ammunition left for it. In a run they headed toward the waiting wagon, and now John Walsh had stirred into action and was holding the lines and turning the mules. Choctaw Charley had leaped to the ground with his rifle. Running a few rods ahead of the wagon, he was dropping to one knee and opening fire on the top of the high rocks, trying to hold back the danger there.

Indians were up there, plenty of them. Devine could see that at the first glance back over his shoulder. As Chadrick had said, more and more seemed to be coming as if bent on filling the rim all around the deep-walled valley. Some of them had already started shooting, a few bullets whistling close to Devine, the girl and Ringo, but most of the shots were being sent toward Chadrick. Devine could see the dust kicking up around him at every burst.

"You damned fools!" gasped Ringo, panting like a winded horse as he ran, bare-headed now and his fine hat in his hand. "Oh, you damned, *damned* fools! That young Indian you shot off the rocks up there was Little Lance, a Sioux next in line for chief! This is going to be hell, I tell you! There's at least a thousand reds camped up the river to start the fall buffalo hunting in the next few days. This will bring them all down on our heads. Hell, man, Little Lance was the son of White Horse, the meanest damned Indian in the world when you get him started!"

"And you should have thought of that," Devine told him, "before you hired those bucks to take the Browns out of the valley this morning!"

"But—but they were not going to hurt the fools!"

"Then you admit it!"

"I don't admit anything!" Ringo turned his head and glared back at him now. "I—I don't know what you're talking about! All I know is the mess you've got us into. We haven't been having Indian troubles in my district. None to speak of, at least!"

"Not you, anyway," Devine said. "You had them working for you when any dirty work was to be done. You can always get a job pulled with rot-gut Indian whiskey, Ringo. I know your kind."

They passed Chadrick a minute later, and the old man jumped to his feet to run with them. At the end of another three hundred yards they came to the wagon where Walsh had brought it to a halt in the edge of a little thicket of pines. Now they could see Joe Brown's cabin ahead beside a little water hole surrounded by huge old cottonwoods. Ringo was brazen enough now to think they were going to turn him loose or at least give him a gun.

"Only I don't want to be seen fighting them!" he gasped. "I think I can still talk

to some of them. I could send for the soldiers. There's a camp about forty miles up the river."

"Save your breath and get back on the wagon, Ringo." Devine gave him a prod with the muzzle of the empty musket. "You're not going to be given a chance to leave us just yet, and as far as trusting you with a gun, I'd rather trust a Texas rattlesnake."

"We have a place for him," whispered the girl as they moved on. "It'll be just a few steps behind the cabin where Dad has been digging in a well some one before us started. The water you see isn't very good to drink. It tastes like a swamp smells."

"Then," nodded Devine, half-smiling, "we probably should hang Ringo up by the heels with his head in it. But don't suggest that to Choctaw Charley," he added quickly. "The old geezer would be just mean enough to do it and sit there playing his battered harmonica while Ringo drowned."

THEY saw Joe Brown now. He was just coming out of a thick patch of timber about six hundred yards northeast of the cabin. Devine could only wonder what had taken him there until the girl explained.

"He went there," she told him, "to leave the horses and the pony out of sight, thinking that Ringo might send one of his marshals after him and accuse him of stealing them, just as he warned you. Now," she glanced back at the rims, "it looks as if nothing could matter."

"Little need to be afraid of Indians," he scowled, "if the whites would play the game on the square with them. It's when you start cheating, lying, and loading them with whiskey that the worst comes out of them."

They were getting to the cabin, Ringo riding sullenly on the wagon and facing the rear, Chadrick just behind him. As Walsh brought the mules to a halt he let out a wail.

"Damn it, Devine, if you have any control over this old buzzard I wish you'd stop him from chewing tobacco and spitting on my coat tails! I—I'd kill him with my bare hands if he didn't have that infernal gun so handy about him!"

"Stop it, Charley! Can't you see that his hat would be better?"

"Never thought of it, Frank." Chadrick

reached for it, but Ringo ducked his head and slid off the wagon and out of his reach.

"As a man of my position and governmental standing," Ringo was beginning to swing into another one of his long-winded spells of ranting, "I demand to be treated as a gentleman, even if you fools do think I am your prisoner for some crazy notion."

"Maybe the Indians would be better to you." Devine laughed at the helpless rage in front of him. "Want us to turn you over to them?"

"I want to get back among my friends!" snarled Ringo. "I have several men who can talk to those reds."

"And make them think," nodded Chadrick, down off the wagon now, "that the settlers in Grass Valley are all agin 'em an' been doin' 'em dirt!"

"They know I have always done the right thing by them—and look!" Ringo's right hand was suddenly coming up to point, quick hope shining in his eyes. "There goes Squawman Seth Bell and Woodpecker Wilson right now! Bell and Wilson are married into both the Sioux and the Cheyennes. White Horse won't allow a buck to harm a hair on their heads."

"Nor yours, probably." Devine gave him another poke with the muzzle of the musket. "Get along to the back of the cabin. We're not going to stand around guarding you all day."

When they came to the well, forty feet deep, and with yet no sign of moisture down there in spite of the big water hole on the other side of the cabin, Ringo immediately balked and started to curse.

Old Choctaw Charley was direct as usual in such matters. There was a windlass over the well, a stout rope wound around it, and a big pail on the end of it that had been used to pull up the dug earth and stone from the bottom of the well. The old man simply picked up the pail and stepped up quietly behind Ringo; and suddenly the pail was over the man's head. As Ringo rocked to one side, trying to push it off, Chadrick made a quick flip of the rope, snatching it up between the fighting legs, and then took a couple of fast turns around the struggling body and dropped two half-hitches in place. A minute later he was winding away at the windlass, and the helpless but still kicking man was lowered head-first into the well.

"An' if he tries to hold on to the bucket down there," he grinned, "I'll drop rocks on his head until he turns loose."

Joe Brown came up at that moment, his face grim and set, looking half-sick with worry. He glanced at Chadrick hauling up the rope and the pail, then stared for a long time at the rim where the two white men had gone up to the Indians.

"That's Bell and Wilson, all right," he finally nodded. "Notorious for the number of squaws they've taken. It's said that Bell has eight and Wilson six, each with several others that died on their hands or ran away from them and their constant drinking."

"And I think," he added after a moment, shaking his head, "I know what we can expect, Mr. Devine. Bell and Wilson will soon have riders coming into the valley and going to every settler. They'll demand the men who killed that Indian, and they won't stop short of making war on us without them. That means you and Mr. Chadrick, of course."

"Yuh think," growled Chadrick, turning away from the well, "white men would give up white men to them reds for what we done to that damn Indian—an' him shootin' arrows at us!"

"When you have wives and children," intoned Brown, thoughtfully, "you are apt to do many things you wouldn't do otherwise. Breed Ringo had a couple of men taken out of here about six weeks ago and turned over to a bunch of Cheyennes for killing one of them. Anything, you see," he grimaced, "can happen to people who live in hell, and this is nothing short of hell when Breed Ringo and his gang start to play you out and down—especially to get your land back and resell it to some other man."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Fire

DOWN in the well, Breed Ringo was not through by a long shot, and never going to be until he was paid in full for this crushing, bitter humiliation that would rankle him for the rest of his life. Landing on his head and shoulders, none too gently at that, he had had a hard time getting his head out of the pail and free of the rope. The well was narrow down here. Even after he had seen the pail and the rope

drawn up he had had another hard time twisting, curling and turning himself right-side-up, and getting to his feet.

Even in the near-darkness he could see that his sixty-dollar hat was ruined, bent and twisted forever out of shape. Along with the hat the rest of him had suffered. He seemed to be bruised from top to bottom. The tight seat of his trousers had been split and torn from crotch to waistband by his kicking and the sawing of the rope, and the left sleeve of his coat had been ripped out.

But with all the man-handling they had overlooked his big silver and gold-shanked spurs, for he always wore them and considered himself not properly dressed without them, even on a dance floor swinging and pivoting gallantly through the Virginia Reel, or leading the Grand March with some new and extra-pretty percentage girl just off the steamboat.

The spurs offered a way out of the well. There were good footholds dug between the layers of rock in the lower walls that would allow one to climb almost half-way to the top. Beyond that there was no rock and only hard yellow clay. A man could gouge and cut holes there with the big, sharp rowels and gradually work himself upward. The world up there would be wrapped in darkness before so very long, and it would shield him when he cut the last hole and wiggled himself out on the surface. No man was going to keep him in a damned hole in the ground!

Despite his sorely wounded pride, the Browns, Devine and Chadrick—and even John Walsh—were actually doing him a great big favor, if the fools had only thought about it. Many of these settlers in Grass Valley had put a load of gold into it, and some of them, about twenty-five, had thrown up good houses and barns. None yet had an out-and-out deed to a square yard of the ground. That was where the blame could be laid on the doorstep of the wise ones back in Washington. Every man in the valley wanted his iron-clad title, and they could always be told that it had to come directly from the Government. Even the buffalo out here must have realized by this time how dumb and slow Washington could be when it came to getting around to something.

Now all these dry-land farmer yokels

would move. Half the blame could be laid on their own shoulders, and the rest on the Indians, those poor red devils who could take and carry so much of it. It would be simple to accuse the settlers now of stirring the redskins into wholesale blood-letting by the killing of Little Lance, son of the proud and every-ready-to-fight White Horse. Not one word of blame would fall on the strong shoulders of Damnation Bend itself.

Lifting one foot at a time, whispering curses at the narrowness of space, he removed his spurs, a man so eager to begin work he had to hold himself for a while yet, his eyes on the disk of light above him. Sheer curiosity might cause somebody up there to look down at any moment and they would see him if he was half way up. He settled back, half-praying for the light above him to dim.

Up on the surface Frank Devine could almost hear the thoughts that were going through the heads of Joe Brown and John Walsh. They were scared and making no pretense of hiding it. They had their own lives to think about as well as Brown's daughter and Walsh's aged wife. Devine and Chadrick could move on, leaving little behind but a couple of mules and a wagon. They had no homes to defend, no loved ones in danger. In a way two men like that could be hated, regardless of what they had done or tried to do. In a pinch it was going to be no great surprise to see all the settlers turn on them to drive them out into the arms of the waiting Indians.

There was every reason in the world for it. Every settler in the valley could see the Indians up there, some merely standing and waiting, others galloping back and forth on horses or ponies, and still others gathered in groups to hold their long pow-wows, hands and arms waving as a number of the younger ones talked. No help would come from Damnation Bend once the fight started. That was another certainty. Damnation Bend would look out only for Damnation Bend and see that no move was made to bring the wrath of the Indians down on it. Hell, this was cut and dried, something that had probably been in the making for days and only needed an excuse.

BBROWN lifted his hand to point as two white men in the distance started coming down a steep trail, one short and bulb-

ous looking, black hair and beard an unkempt cloud around his head, the other so long and lean a good wind might have tied him into knots. "That's Wilson an' Bell, the squawmen. They've been waving back to the Bend from up there, and here comes others pouring through the pass. Now the whole valley will be aroused. Don't you think," he was coming out with it at last, "you two should at least try to get out of here and let us try to handle it the best we can?"

"No!" The girl answered him, and there was bitterness in her tone and fire in her eyes. "What good would it do other than to get themselves killed? The fact that they might go would not stop this thing. The valley is in for a fight, and this time, Dad, we must win it or die!"

"He was only thinkin' of savin' 'em!" put in the silent Walsh, his voice a wail of terror now. "That was all, Miss Letty!"

"And you," she told him, "are only thinking about your own hide—or your neck. Thank God, there are two men who are willing to fight! We have a few more in the valley, and some of the women will manage guns when it comes right down to it. If you and Mr. Chadrick do try to go," she swung eagerly to Devine, "then I'm going to go with you. Dad has some ammunition that will do well enough in the old musket."

"No one is thinking of going," Devine looked steadily into her eyes. "No one could leave if he tried. Look." He waved his hand at the high, surrounding walls of the valley. "As far as I can see, and judging by what you and your father have told us, there are only a few places where one could leave on horses or mules, and they'll be so well-guarded a rabbit couldn't slip through. We'll stay and fight."

"An' maybe have to fight some of these settlers, too," put in Chadrick, "if they side the reds. Hell, Brown, there ain't no use in us dyin' just to please Breed Ringo!"

But it was a wait, and it seemed that the Indians were too eager to let more and more men from Damnation Bend come streaming into the valley, supposedly to go and warn every settler. By the time darkness had settled they heard gunfire toward the pass and saw the flash of flame there, while a crazy yelling lifted below.

"Sounds like a double-cross, Frank."

Chadrick was peering toward the scene. "Here comes somebody on a hoss—an' he's comin' like hell aburnin' in his britches!"

"Don't shoot!" wailed a voice above the clatter of hoofs a minute later. "Gawd, they've gone crazy as hell!"

The man thundered up then. He flung down, stumbled to a halt, wiping blood from the left side of his face where a bullet had grazed his cheek.

"Where's Ringo?" he demanded. "White Horse has to be stopped. He claims that Ringo double-crossed him on some whiskey and some bullets. He says the bullets won't fit the rifles that were sold to him not long ago, and now he swears he's going to attack both the Bend and the valley—and he has let as many men inside as will come, to keep from fighting them on the outside. This looks like a wipe-out unless Ringo can stop it."

"All right!" Devine wheeled. "Get him out of the well, Charley!"

"Done agoin' for 'im," Chadrick was hurrying toward the well. He grabbed the big pail, letting it down rapidly on the windlass. "Get aboard down there!" he yelled. "Yuh got business on top now, though I can't see no way yo're gonna handle it!"

And then he was swearing, banging the big pail from side to side on the rope and hearing it only strike rock. As a man in a daze he turned away. He had been keeping an eye on the well but not too closely. Brown had said that there were no foot-holes for the first twenty feet, but the well was empty now.

"He's gone, Frank!" he half-wailed. "Clean gone!"

"Look!—Oh, Gawd, look!" The cry was from Walsh, coming as if to drown Chadrick's voice. "They're startin' a fire all 'round us! Look at it come pourin' down from the rims."

Devine and the others were staring, instantly knowing what was happening. The Indians were not waiting for Ringo. They were dropping fire from the high rims, letting it fall into the tall, half-cured grass below. Very soon now the entire valley would be ablaze, the fire coming in and encircling the houses and barns of every settler.

"The dirty dogs!" yelled Chadrick. "Where'n hell did that damn Ringo go—an' how in hell did he get outa that well!"

Ringo might have answered him if he had wanted to. He was only about eighty yards away, crawling on his hands and knees through a dense little clump of bushes beyond the water hole.

CLIMBING out of the well and quickly making his get-away, Ringo could see in one look what was happening. Never in all his wildest planning had he ever thought it would come to this. He had talked of the use of fire many times. Twelve or fifteen cabins had been burned, but they had been only the shoddy ones, nothing that would be worth any money in the eyes of some prospective settler coming along with his pockets lined with gold.

Real fear gripped him now, but he was not too afraid of White Horse, if he could only get to the big devil and talk to him without too many of his wild bucks around him. White Horse had been ready to fight everything in sight before, and hearing the man who had come galloping up to the cabin made it almost certain that Ringo could talk and bribe his way out of this one. All whiskey was sometimes bad, and if a mistake had been made on ammunition, then the right cartridges, powder and bullets could be found.

With the gunfire growing in violence, and the flames in the grass beginning to rise higher and higher all around, he broke through the wall of brush and half-dead grass east of the cabin, and started to run along the foot of the rocks. Before he had gone sixty yards he was stopping with a snarl and trying to crowd back against the rocks as the tall figure broke through a wall of low trees ahead of him and was cutting him off.

It was that damned Dodge City Frank Devine, no longer the scarecrow now, for he had had other buckskins and boots on the wagon. Devine came right on to him, covering him with a six-shooter. There seemed but little malice in his tone when he spoke.

"I figured you would have only one way to run, Ringo," he said. "You would go the quickest way, and when I heard you were gone I set out to head you off. We'll go back now—and stick it out together."

"You damned fool!" croaked Ringo, left hand feeling for a rock on the wall behind him. "All we'll do is burn alive! This

whole valley is going by the board, every house, fence, and building in it!"

"Just the same," Devine told him calmly, "we'll go back and face it. People are going to be killed here if this thing can't be stopped, and you're the whole cause of it. Get going!"

"*Damn you!*" Desperation making him insane, Ringo's left hand came swinging forward a lump of rock in it. Another man probably would have shot him, but Devine only rolled himself to one side, letting the blow pass, and then stepped forward and knocked him down. He was thrusting his six-shooter back into its holster and about to pick him up when the world appeared to fall upon him.

It was an Indian, dropping from a ledge six or eight feet above him and landing on his shoulders with both feet, knocking him down. In the next instant the air seemed filled with falling Indians, dropping in twos and threes until there were eight of them.

"I am Big White Friend!" gasped Ringo when he was yanked to his feet and his hands snatched behind him, a stout strip of deerhide being whipped around his wrists. "Take me to White Horse!"

"We take!" grunted an Indian behind him, giving him a quick poke with his knee. "We take damn soon!"

Never before had an Indian handled him so roughly, and it scared him, making him think that one of them might kill him before they could get him to the rim. They were equally mean with Devine in their terrific hurry, and it seemed only seconds before they were being rushed away, each with his hands fastened behind him and the keen point of a knife jammed in his back by a red hand.

"I am the Big White Friend!" Ringo kept trying to argue with them all the way to the top. "I am friend to the great Chief White Horse!"

They had no answer for him, did not seem interested in the slightest. Up a break in the rocks, they were soon on the rim and trotting along it for eighty or ninety rods before they were swinging to the right on a blunt spur of the cliffs overlooking the valley.

Now Breed Ringo saw White Horse, a tall, handsome Indian in his huge bonnet, the red arms folded across his chest arrogantly. Knowing that it was going to cost

GUN-GOD OF DAMNATION BEND

him a fortune to get out of this one, Ringo started right in to barter.

"Big, big mistake, White Horse!" he cried. "Big White Friend fix everything quick as—"

"Lie!" The Indian's right hand left his chest and came forward in a furious slap that caught Ringo hard across the nose and mouth. "Many times white man lie! Bullets no fit guns! Rum kill Indians! Rum no good. Rum poison."

"Big White friend give more rum!" Ringo was watching that wicked right hand, unable to move backward because of the savage still behind him with the point of a knife against his spine, but hoping that he might be able to jerk his head to one side if another blow came. "Good rum! Me give more guns and plenty bullets!"

"White man give lies!"

Devine could only stand and listen, a knife still at his back and a sullenly silent red behind him. From the start he realized that Ringo would not get very far with this tall, bold redskin. As the talk labored on he came to know that Ringo had sent a barrel of Indian rum to White Horse at his hunting camp only a couple of nights before. Almost immediately it had started making many bucks and squaws violently ill, and before dawn eleven bucks and squaws had died in terrible agony.

THIS kind of murder was not new on the frontier. Devine had known of paint barrels being used in the mixing of the hellish slop some men had the guts to call rum. Ringo must have known something about it. He tried to go into a long-winded explanation, and now White Horse hit him so hard he knocked him against Devine, almost shoving him off his feet before he could catch himself.

It was then that Devine felt the sting of the knife behind him. In the sudden push the Indian at his back had let the keen blade come downward and saw so deeply into the deerhide strip around Devine's wrists that it had cut through and into the skin itself.

The cut might have been discovered if Ringo had not gone into such a wild fit when he realized what they were going to do with him. All the talk in the world was not getting him back into the good graces of the tall White Horse. The Indian had



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given one tense order in Sioux, and Ringo must have understood it, for he broke and tried to run, yelling at the top of his voice.

"Burn him!" yelled White Horse.

"Now!"

It had come suddenly, as everything else had come in this wild game of life and death playing itself out. Ringo's sheer terror and his mad attempt to do something to save himself had thrown instant confusion into all of them. Even the Indian right behind Devine had whirled to one side, catching Ringo's arm to help yank him back.

To Frank Devine it was one of those crazy, second-lasting times when opportunity blinked its quick eye in a man's face and he was desperate enough to try anything. He was close to the edge of the outward spur of the rim here. Always observant, he had seen that it was not much more than sixty feet down to the floor of the valley, a drop long enough to kill a man if it had not been for something else down there.

It was a bushy pine down there, growing close to the rocks and the top of it reaching up for more than thirty feet. No man would have thought of chancing it unless driven to it by the most hopeless desperation. Learning that he might free his wrists and hands with two or three fierce pulls after the knife had cut through the strip of deerhide, he now made his try for it, his eyes on the confused Indians still struggling with the crazed Ringo.

The first pull failed him. He tried again, holding his body as still as possible. When the second one failed he threw all caution aside. With a wild surge of his body that seemed to bring every muscle into play, his hands broke free.

White Horse was in front of him, his broad back to him for only a moment. With a yell from himself in the sheer excitement of it, Devine threw both arms around the chief, jerking him off the ground. Now he ran backward, the Indians leaping and grabbing for him, the chief kicking his feet and flailing savagely with his powerful arms. Like that, they went over the rim, the startled Indians behind them jerking to a halt just in time, cries of terror lifting from them.

They turned over in the air before they struck the top of the pine, and the chief was on the underside, the smaller limbs crashing

GUN-GOD OF DAMNATION BEND

and breaking away, taking some of the shock out of it before they struck the larger ones near the ground. But there was no telling which was which, for it was so fast the noise was only a short, splintering crash, and they were at the bottom and rolling free of each other.

White Horse got up in a daze, half the fine headgear torn off of him. In a jerk or two Devine had him up and across his shoulders, and was running with a mean limp toward the cabin of the Browns, leaving yells and cries of dismay up there on the rim.

He was almost half-way to the cabin when the yell of all yells came to him, punctuated by a furious splattering of shots on the rim. Terror held that cry from the start to the finish, making it a fierce scream of some horribly wounded wild animal. Almost as quickly as it started, it was gone, ending in a crashing sound of something smashing on the rocks at the foot of the cliffs.

Devine did not know it for a fact and could only guess at it, but it was Ringo making his escape from torture at the hands of the reds up there. Seeing Devine and the chief go—and getting himself free for an instant in the maddening burst of excitement, he had come forward with a blind man's rush and plunged into space. But he had missed the tree. . . .

“**H**OLD yore fire, gal, it's Frank!” Chadrick stopped the girl with the old musket just in time. “An' what'n hell—what'n hell's he totin' like a hawg on his back!”

“It's White Horse, Charley!” cried Devine as he came limping up. “The big, bad red in person!”

They got him to the wagon. It was another fight despite all the tying for the chief surged from side to side, dropping to his knees and springing upward, a wild one to hold in any manner they grabbed him. As a last resort, Devine banged him on the jaw one more time, and by the time he was out of it he was tied with his back to the wheel, the yet proud and arrogant face turned toward the cliffs.

“Don't think they'll dare to come after him.” The last of Devine's breath seemed pumped and jarred out of him. “They know



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we'd kill him before we'd give him up, and they'll not see him hurt."

There was still a chance of saving the valley, if the Indians only let up taking potshots from the rim at people trying to fight the fire. Luckily, there was no wind, and it was not traveling as fast as it might have. But White Horse was still the Indian, not going to say one thing to his bucks.

They tried slapping his face. It was like slapping a rock, still and emotionless except for a little streak of blood coming from his long-curving beak of a nose. Chadrick kicked him on the shins, then as good as played a tune on them with a stout little stick, but it was again useless when it came to getting him to change his mind.

"Me strong Indian," he told them, the hint of a hard little smile on that proud face. "Me much strong! Big white man tell lie. No white man tell truth. His tongue crooked like snake's."

"But we have no love for Ringo, White Horse!" Devine tried to argue with him. "Ringo is fighting whites in valley, and I think he's back there dead now at the foot of the rocks. The people here haven't done anything to you."

"All white men lie. Only good white men dead white men."

"To hell with this!" Chadrick was turning away in disgust. "Damn if I ever did fool this long with a plain killer. I'll make 'im talk."

He turned and headed for the cabin. Settlers in this part of the world always had live coals bedded in their fireplaces, keeping them for many days at a time without having to start a new fire. In a couple of minutes the old man was back with a Big fire shovel loaded with red-hot coals. He jerked his head at the girl to move away, and then spoke with a growl to Devine.

"Open his britches, Frank!"

"No!" A pinch of fear showed in the chief's face for the first time. "Indian kill white man for that! No!"

"Indian will stop fire!" half yelled Chadrick. "Yuh hear me? Yuh tell yore gang to stop shootin' an' clear the hell off them rims or in goes the fire. Yo've let enough Damnation Benders in here to fan this thing out— Oh, hell, Frank, let's just go ahead with it!"

"No!" Again there was fear in White

GUN-GOD OF DAMNATION BEND

Horse's proud face. "Indian him tell bucks stop!"

"Then, by Gawd, tell!"

"Sioux braves will go away!" It was an all-powerful voice rolling up and out of the valley from that wagon wheel now, a god speaking to his children in their own tongue. "Sioux braves will stop fight and let all white men go! I am White Horse, and I have spoken!"

It was all that he had to tell them, all that was needed.

WITHIN two hours there was not a blade of fire showing in the valley. Some houses that had started to burn had been saved, and by dawn the last Damnation Bender was out and gone, many of them due to keep going, for Frank Devine had sent riders for the soldiers camped forty miles up the river and they would be coming sometime after sunrise.

"An' where'n hell do we go from here now?" Chadrick was wanting to know. "Looks like peace has come to these folks."

"Maybe we'll stay here and partake of some of it for a change." Frank Devine was listening to Letty Brown's quick footsteps moving back and forth in the cabin as she prepared breakfast for them. "We still have our gold in the bed of the wagon. I know—I've just looked. Maybe we could pitch in with Joe Brown and open that big store in the valley."

"Wimmin troubles, huh?" Choctaw Charley rubbed his chin thoughtfully, scowled, then grinned. "If I was about two or three thousan' years younger maybe I'd say I didn't blame yuh. . ."

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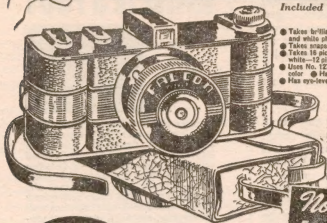
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Now Available! For Immediate Shipment. EXCEL 16 MM. Movie Projector



A Laugh a Minute Cartoon Films

- Our Gang Comedies
- Krazy Kat
- The 3 Stooges

Scraps in 16 ft. Rolls at only \$2.75 a roll.

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This is the Finest Low-Priced Motor-Driven Projector Available. Comes furnished with a 200 ft. Take-up Reel, 2-inch lens in focusing mount, tilting device, 120-watt lamp, accessible Spring Belt Drive, Motor Driven Rewind, Switch control Motor, Baked on Enamel Finish and Power-House Type Constant speed motor, A.C. only. Shipping wt. 7 lbs.

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Please ship as indicated below:
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The Outlaw

HERE'S WHY THIS
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1944—HOWARD HUGHES, WORLD
FAMOUS FLYER AND MOTION
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HIS PICTURE **THE OUTLAW**.

HOWARD HUGHES DISCOVERED
JEAN HARLOW, PAUL MUNI,
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NOW, IN **THE OUTLAW**, HE
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JANE RUSSELL



JUNE, 1944—**THE OUTLAW** WORLD
PREMIERE IS HELD AT SAN FRANCISCO. THE PICTURE BREAKS
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HELD OVER FOR 8 WEEKS!
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THEN...**THE OUTLAW** IS BANNED
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CUT A SINGLE SCENE FROM THE FILM,
HOWARD HUGHES WITHDRAWS
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I'M GOING TO FIGHT THIS
BATTLE TO THE FINISH
AND MAKE SURE THAT THE
PUBLIC SEES MY PICTURE
EXACTLY AS I MADE IT!

THE OUTLAW

INTRODUCING **JANE RUSSELL**

DARING! THRILLING! FAST MOVING!

ALSO
STARRING

THANK YOU, MR. HUGHES



NOW, AT LAST, AFTER A TWO YEARS FIGHT WITH THE CENSORS,
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THE OUTLAW... EXACTLY AS IT WAS FILMED!!
NOT A SCENE CUT!! AND INTRODUCING A NEW STAR,
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